K Balfour

GIRALDI.

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Giraldi;

OR,

THE CURSE OF LOVE.

BY

ROSS GEORGE DERING.

"I had once been shown a blue star, and wished to renew my acquaintance with it. I had to learn that there were no really blue stars, and the colour had been due to an imperfectly achromatic lens—a type perhaps of some other celestial truths of which we fancy ourselves perfectly certain."—FROUDE.

"Nothing strikes me so forcibly with a sense of the ridiculous as Love. A man in love, I do think, cuts the sorryest figure in the world. . . . The love of a woman is a cloying treacle to the wings of independence."—KEATS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TO

THOMAS LOWESTOFT, ESQUIRE,

OF BRAYBROOKE HALL, LINCOLNSHIRE,

IN RECOGNITION OF HIS UNWEARIED ATTEMPTS TO DISCOURAGE ME IN MY LITERARY CAREER, AND TO DISSUADE ME, IN PARTICULAR, FROM PUBLISHING THE PRESENT WORK,

This Book

IS INSCRIBED

BY HIS VERY HUMBLE FRIEND AND SERVANT,

R. G. D.

Dering House, Co. Wicklow,
May 1889.

Characters.

THE DUKE OF GRANDCHESTER.
THE DUKE OF MONEYSWORTH.
THE MARQUIS OF PULVILIO, *son to the Duke of Grandchester.*
SIR JUPITER RAMPANT, *a retired Official.*
DR. URQUHART, *a Physician.*
GIRALDI, *a young Catholic gentleman of fortune.*
ERIC CHARTERIS, *son to Lady Sharp.*
REV. CHAUNCEY FAIRWEATHER, *the Rector of Heathercombe.*
REV. ORIEL ST. JEROME, *Curate of S. Simon-in-the-Slums.*
REV. ARTHUR TRESHAM, *Incumbent of the District Church.*
REV. JABEZ INSIGHT, *Independent Minister.*
REV. ISRAEL DOOM, *Baptist Minister.*
REV. ISSACHAR LEECH, *Original-Perfectionist Minister.*
REV. FATHER ALOYSIUS, *Superior of St. Gertrude's Oratory.*
CAPTAIN RICOCHET, *a friend of Eric Charteris.*
MR. AUGUSTUS POUND, *a country Banker.*
MR. BAWSTON MASS, *an American millionaire.*
THE DUCHESS OF MONEYSWORTH.
LADY GWENDOLEN HONOURBRIGHT, *daughter to the Duke of Grandchester.*
LADY GLOATOVER, LADY TURQUOISE, } *friends of Lady Gwendolen.*
LADY RAMPANT.
LADY SHARP, *a widow.*
EDITH CHARTERIS, *her daughter.*
BEATRICE HEATH, *a friend of Edith Charteris.*
MARGARET ASHE, *a useful member of society.*
NAOMI INSIGHT, *daughter to Rev. Jabez Insight.*
HELEN JARVIS, *a schoolfellow of Naomi's.*
MRS. BUXOM, *a brewer's wife.*

Deacons, Servants, Population, &c.

Scene—HEATHERCOMBE IN WESTLANDSHIRE.

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GIRALDI;

OR,

THE CURSE OF LOVE.

CHAPTER I.

TRESHAM LOQUITUR.

I SUPPOSE there are few feelings more natural than the affection which springs up for places we have made our home for any considerable period of our lives. In my own case the sentiment rises almost to a passion; and whenever the time comes for me to leave a house that has been my shelter even for no more than a year or two, it seems as though I were being torn in twain. The very chairs and tables appear endowed with a reciprocal regret, and to reproach one, in their dumb, sightless fashion, with unfaithfulness to one's old friends; while every street and corner in the neighbourhood becomes eloquent with its own silent stories of bygone days and reminiscences. It may be that this is a weakness despised by men who have knocked about the world; but I am convinced that most

people will plead guilty, if they are honest, to having experienced its influence at some time or other of their existence. At any rate, such was certainly the case with me when the day arrived for me to give up my old Brompton lodgings, where I had read, smoked, and vegetated for four years, with no other relaxation than an occasional trip to Killarney or the North of France, and a flying visit now and then to my worthy relatives at Abbey Wood. Dull, sombre, and oppressively respectable as those lodgings undoubtedly were, long and eagerly as I had yearned for change and a more active sphere of life, yet, when I found myself beginning to pack up my pipes and books, and giving notice of my intended departure to Mrs. Rotheram, my landlady—(dear old soul! she had a stroke of paralysis soon afterwards, and tumbled into the fireplace, dragging Heaven knows how many cups and saucers with her off the dining-table)—when I found how comfortless and deserted the old rooms looked, I experienced a pang most painfully akin to that produced by a sudden attack of indigestion. It was so unexpected, too, this leaving of Mrs. Rotheram and my humdrum London life. Only a week before, I had been planning a trip to Somersetshire, and speculating how far a twenty-pound note would carry me, when, strolling meditatively one day down Piccadilly, I

became conscious that some one was hailing me with an umbrella from a passing hansom, and heard a well-known voice exclaim, "Hullo, Tresham! the very man I was looking for!" Whereupon, on closer investigation, I recognised the big brown face and flowing beard of Sir Jupiter Rampant, late Commissioner of something-or-other in Prince Edward's Island. Of course I was glad to find that for once in my life I was in demand, and as I knew Sir Jupiter to be not only the most good-natured person in the world, but a man of some small influence into the bargain, I readily accepted his invitation to take a seat beside him and listen to what he had to say.

"You remember old Sir John Sharp?" continued the worthy knight, pausing for me to nod an affirmative. "Well, you see, the living at Heathercombe which he gave to poor Owen became vacant some time ago, and has remained so ever since; and as I suppose the people of the district are blessed with souls like the rest of us, it is certainly advisable that the hand-to-mouth system should not continue any longer. Now Sir John's amiable widow asked me the other day whether I thought I could pitch upon a—what was it she said?—a faithful gospeller or an 'acceptable' something, I can't exactly swear what—to put in Owen's place. She isn't a Churchwoman herself,

you know; but as the living happens to be in her hands, she is anxious to see the pulpit filled by an incumbent of strictly orthodox principles and without very much will of his own. So if you can conscientiously declare, my dear Tresham, that you answer to the required description in both respects, why there's a precious field of labour open to you at once and three hundred a year into the bargain."

Now here was a temptation. Orthodox, and without much will of my own! All I could do was to throw myself back in my seat and survey the position. It certainly was tempting. I was a budding young Church of England parson, with a morbid horror of everything clerical. I detested the livery, and generally wore a loose lounge-coat, with, I am afraid, rather latitudinarian neckties. At college I had been repudiated by every school of theology that boasted a representative. The High Churchmen said I was Low, the Low Churchmen said I was Broad, and the Broad Churchmen said that whatever my other spiritual dimensions might be, I sadly wanted depth. I was well up in most of the religious controversies of the day; had dipped into Spurgeon's sermons and other Nonconformist literature; and had been suspected of a leaning towards the Church of Rome. I was familiar with the phraseology peculiar to the

Plymouth Brethren, and had once in my life been spoken of by a muscular Methodist as a very weak brother. In view of all this, could I be considered orthodox? It was true that I had signed, and (with certain allowable elasticities of interpretation) believed in, the Thirty-nine Articles; so much was in my favour. But then, on the other hand, I revered Channing as heartily as I abhorred Calvin; and this was sufficient in itself to condemn anybody as a heretic. Such were the bewildering considerations which chased each other through my brain as the hansom bowled along the Knightsbridge Road and Sir Jupiter masticated the thick end of a large cheroot.

Then I began to think of Heathercombe, and tried to recall all I had ever known of the place and its inhabitants. First there was that dreadful old Lady Sharp, who dressed in black bombazine that somehow always looked dusty and rough, and invariably spoke in short, cynical, snappish sentences, calculated to exasperate the mildest and meekest of men. I had a recollection of having seen her as a child, and distinctly remembered conceiving a strong antipathy towards her. Lady Sharp was a chosen vessel, and made great capital out of the distinction. In her benighted younger days she had belonged to the Establishment; but since her arrival at a knowledge of the truth,

she had identified herself with a peculiar sect called the Original Perfectionists, the chapel in which they assembled being always spoken of among them as a "cause." The "cause" attended by Lady Sharp was known in the neighbourhood as the Little Hill, in contradistinction to the Greater Hill, a "cause" of more considerable dimensions in the next town, which also belonged to the same denomination. Over this fold, and all the officers attached thereto, Lady Sharp reigned and ruled supreme. She patronised the deacons and had them to midday dinner on Sundays, the poorer saints being regaled on tea and toast in the kitchen; while as for the minister, the Rev. Issachar Leech, he very nearly lived upon her. Then my thoughts turned off to Eric Charteris, Lady Sharp's son by a previous marriage, and an old schoolfellow of my own. It was, in fact, through him that I had gleaned all these particulars of his lady-mother, with whom, poor youth, he was leading a pretty miserable life. Eric's father, Captain Charteris, died of consumption about four years after he had espoused the showy daughter of a decayed attorney, leaving two children to be brought up by a most injudicious mother. Ten years afterwards, Mrs. Charteris married a very old City alderman, with a comfortable income, whom she lectured and bullied so mercilessly that the unfortunate

man died in eighteen months, as his only method of escape; whereupon his widow found herself at the age of nine-and-forty the mistress of a spacious house, and a very handsome jointure wherewith to keep it up.

Now between young Charteris and myself there had always existed a very cordial friendship. He was rather a fast lad, I am afraid, and occasionally given to language which, to put it mildly, might be termed unparliamentary; a fair billiard-player, an inordinate smoker, and an excellent shot, with about as much capacity for instructive reading or rational conversation as a rope-dancer. In spite of this, however, a very sincere attachment had sprung up between us. With all his faults, Eric was as true as steel, and a gentleman to the backbone; the best of sons, the best of brothers, and the best of friends. At the time I refer to, he was a tall, well-grown youth, just turned twenty-one, with a fair, pale complexion, and large, grey, handsome eyes, full of amiability and kindness; but irresolute, feather-brained, and self-indulgent to a degree. His sister Edith I had never met, but concluded that she was about as much of a divinity as women are generally said to be between eighteen and twenty-five.

"Well, Sir Jupiter," I said at last, "I suppose the only thing I can do is to thank you more than I can express,

and accept your generous offer. If the future shows that I do not come up to the prescribed requirements, let the consequences rest upon my own head. As regards Lady Sharp, I must trust to my native diplomacy, and hope for the best. As far as you are concerned, I can never feel sufficiently grateful."

"Oh, that's all right," replied Sir Jupiter in his offhand style. "I considered you'd be the proper man, and I'm glad you've decided to accept. But now there's a point I want to speak to you about before you go; so if you're not engaged, and will come straight home and dine with us—only my wife and myself—I can have a talk with you upon the matter at once."

"If Lady Rampant will excuse my unorthodox coat, I'll come with pleasure," I replied; for certainly a more unclerical-looking individual than myself at that moment it would have been difficult to conceive. But I was anxious to hear as much as possible about my new field of labour, and naturally was glad of any opportunity that might offer of rendering service to my kind friend Sir Jupiter. Shortly afterwards we pulled up at his house in Marlborough Crescent, where I received a pleasant welcome from Lady Rampant, one of the most agreeable hostesses in London. She was one of those pale, elegant women

who, without being handsome, attract more genuine admiration than nine-tenths of the professed beauties, and she now greeted me with a quiet kindliness which kindled into cordial warmth when Sir Jupiter told her at dinner about the arrangement of the Heathercombe affair.

"I cannot tell you how glad I am to hear it, Mr. Tresham," she said, as she peeled her walnuts. "Sir Jupiter and I both agreed what a comfort it would be to us to think that Giraldi would have some one near him in whom we have such confidence as we have in you, and who will, I am sure, be so good a friend to him as yourself. Of course it would never do——"

"Come, Alice my dear, you are forestalling me," interposed her husband. "As far as I know, Tresham has never heard of Giraldi in his life, and it was on this subject that I wanted to speak to him. The fact is, Tresham," he continued, turning to me, "there is a ward of mine, a boy of eighteen or thereabouts, living with his tutor down at Heathercombe. He is of Spanish descent, and a Roman Catholic. The tutor is a most excellent man, as far as I know—one Father Aloysius—but under his influence the lad is growing up a perfect little monk, I'm told, and I don't half like it. I'm a

staunch Protestant myself, and though I'm a trifle more liberal in my views than folks generally, I do feel a strong distrust of the Jesuit influence brought to bear upon him. From all accounts, young Giraldi is very deeply attached to his religion, and spends half his time in studying ecclesiastical history and what not under his confessor; and while I wouldn't for worlds disturb the boy's convictions, or put anything like controversy in his way, I should be very glad for some counter-influence to be introduced. A healthy religious feeling is one thing; a morbid enthusiasm is another. By George! when I think of all they tell me about that boy, my blood nearly boils over. Not because he's of a different religion from myself, but because he's so bound down, body and soul, to those priests. They may be well-meaning enough for aught I know, but I tell you the boy is simply under their thumbs; he's like a bit of cobbler's wax in their hands; his very conscience isn't his own, and if they tell him black's white, which I'm perfectly sure they do, he swallows it without winking. It strikes me, therefore, that if a man like yourself came in his way, and just contrived to draw him a little out of his present groove, it would do him an immensity of good. I want you, out of friendship to me, to be a sort of companion to the lad;

to get him out riding or boating, to make him read books of a liberal and practical tendency, and, in a word, to give him a good routing out. I don't pretend to be much of a theologian myself, but still I have my opinions," concluded Sir Jupiter a little vaguely, as he sipped his claret, "and all I want is to see Giraldi more of a man and less of a monk than I fear he is at present."

"Yes, indeed," added Lady Rampant, turning her kindly brown eyes upon me as she spoke. "Giraldi will be a rich man one of these days, Mr. Tresham, and just think what it would be to see a fine English fortune fall into the hands of those dreadful priests. I saw one of them once—a sly-looking man with a smooth face, and oh, so dirty! To think of Giraldi getting so far as to consider cleanliness a sin! You may laugh, my dear," said the excellent lady, as Sir Jupiter's good-humoured face puckered up in all directions with undisguised enjoyment of his wife's ideas on papistical ablutions, "but I'm perfectly serious for all that. I do plead guilty to an intense horror of Popery in general and priests in particular, and I would rather see Giraldi in his grave than become a dirty, shaven monk. Don't you think I'm right, Mr. Tresham?"

"I assure you that what you have told me interests

me greatly," I replied evasively, with a strong effort to keep my countenance. "I am most anxious to make Giraldi's acquaintance, and feel sure that we shall be excellent friends. But has he no companions of his own age? Does he never visit in the neighbourhood?"

"Well, as to that," replied Sir Jupiter, "I'm inclined to think he does. He's only been there a few months; but I believe Lady Sharp condescends to patronise him occasionally, very much as she might a Buddhist or a Fiji Islander. But really I scarcely know. I am very slightly acquainted with Heathercombe. All I know is that it abounds with parsons of every hue and shade: great is the company of preachers. But what sort of people they all are, or what the society is like, I have no more idea than the man in the moon. It's an entirely unexplored field as far as I am concerned."

"But is Lady Sharp as great an autocrat as she is represented?" I asked, a vague presentiment creeping over me that my future cure might not prove altogether a bed of roses. "What I cannot understand about her is, that being so completely given over to this strange whim of Original Perfectionism—whatever that may be—she should still be so particular about the doctrines preached from a

Church of England pulpit. She can never expect them to coincide with her own views."

"You forget, Mr. Tresham, that she is a woman, and, like all the rest of us, is fond of power," replied Lady Rampant, laughing. "Lady Sharp is as inveterate a pope as any who ever wore petticoats, and has no objection to a little temporal power in her own sphere, although she does look upon everybody who is not an Original Perfectionist as a heathen man and a publican. She makes no secret of her suspicion that the Church of England is nearly related to Babylon; so you must not be surprised if her surveillance is apt to become a little embarrassing at times. However, I don't think you need be very much afraid. She's not a bad woman at heart; only a trifle domineering, and perhaps a little—mad."

Lady Rampant here rose from the table, and thereupon Sir Jupiter launched out. He was one of the most amusing talkers I ever knew, and his fund of anecdote was inexhaustible. There was scarcely a single man of note with whom he had not come into contact at one period or another of his life—according to his own account—or a sphere of politics in which his influence was unfelt. We sat over our cheroots and Burgundy till nearly eleven, and when I came away, it was with a confused idea that the

Premier was a mere puppet in the hands of Sir Jupiter Rampant; that the Archbishop of Canterbury never issued a charge without talking the matter over with him first; that the Lord Chamberlain invariably consulted him with respect to the licensing of plays, and that the stroke of policy to which we owed the acquisition of Cyprus did *not* originate with the statesman who is generally credited with it. Sir Jupiter had evidently been a very powerful person in his day; but that palmy period must have been long past. Whatever he may have been previously, I only knew him as the kindest and most genial of men, and the best *raconteur* in the town.

CHAPTER II.

LADY SHARP AT HOME.

One of the many crosses laid upon the sturdy shoulders of Lady Sharp during her pilgrimage through the town which is called Vanity was the necessity of periodically entertaining the gay world. Once a month the ample doors of Brookfield Hall were thrown open to receive her neighbours, and as she rather prided herself on never doing things by halves, however disagreeable they might be, she made a point of inviting persons of every possible persuasion, profession, and pursuit. On these occasions she was wont to emerge from her dressing-room in extra-rustling crapes and more than usually funereal silks, telling herself that, having done her duty to the Church every day for a month before, she would not begrudge a few hours to the world she so despised. Her guests had long since made up their minds to take her as she was, and her evenings became an institution. On the particular Thursday of which we are writing, her rooms

were more than usually full, owing to the rumour that the new clergyman, who had only arrived two days previously, was to appear for the first time on that occasion; and it is therefore a good opportunity to introduce our readers to some of the more prominent members of society in the neighbourhood which forms the scene of this most veracious history.

Brookfield Hall was a big red-brick mansion, standing in its own grounds, about a mile from the village—old, ugly, and comfortable. Everything about it was dingy and showed signs of wear, but the general appearance was pleasant and homelike enough. The rooms were spacious, the hall was lofty and well-proportioned, and the house well warmed and lighted throughout. Dull and quiet as it generally is, to-night there is a confused hum of voices mingled with sounds of cheerful laughter, and the ruddy glow of light which confronts us as we open the drawing-room door imparts a very lively aspect to the scene. Let us take a quiet glance round the ottomans and sofas, and make our acquaintances at leisure.

Imprimis, ensconced in dowdy grandeur amid billows of rustling crape, sits Lady Sharp; red, plethoric, and severe. She is nodding her head with a nervous motion

peculiar to herself as she converses loftily with a pleasant-looking brown-bearded man of thirty or thereabouts, who is evidently on easy terms and knows how to manage her. He is speaking half-chaffingly, half-deferentially upon some subject of trivial import, and Lady Sharp is snubbing him right and left, to his great apparent delight. At a short distance from her mother sits Edith Charteris, a frank and comely girl of nineteen, victimising herself for the entertainment of a ponderous German, who is shockingly ill at ease, but most immensely flattered. His English is imperfect, and he is consequently a trifle slow to understand, but his admiration paralyses him altogether. "*Donnerwetter! das Mädchen ist aber allerliebst,*" he exclaims under his breath, as Edith is called away to the other end of the room, and the stalwart Teuton, relieved from his ordeal, takes refuge in a photographic album. Under the principal chandelier stands, in an attitude of approved mediæval obliquity, the Rev. Oriel St. Jerome, the High Church curate of St. Simon-in-the-Slums, a well-meaning young man who combines a picturesque bias towards asceticism with a latitudinarian partiality for lawn-tennis, and submits to the *hyperdulia* of young ladies as a honeyed form of carnal mortification. This very worthy and harmless person is engaged in discussing church decoration,

Gregorian music, and other profundities of his profession with a handsome dark-eyed girl somewhat theatrically dressed in scarlet and white; but she belongs to the district church, and disdains to join in the calf-worship of St. Simon's. In a distant corner of the room we see another cleric, of a very different type from the youthful Anglican. This man is decidedly slovenly in his dress; his short beard and moustache are ill-trimmed and scrubby; his eyes are weak, and protected by blue spectacles; and his name is Issachar Leech. Writhing under the paw of Mr. Leech, who has pounced upon him unawares, is Eric Charteris—fair, tall, handsome, and unintellectual. He would give an hour of his life for a game at billiards with Captain Ricochet, the pleasant-looking man above mentioned; but the fates are against him for the present, for Mr. Leech is deep in the account of a mission to the Mpongwes, and takes no note of time. Then we have Mr. Augustus Pound, the wealthy banker, a yellow bachelor of sixty; Mr. Buxom, the rather wealthier brewer, with his jovial wife, a lady of unusual circumference and placid smiles; and Dr. Urquhart, the favourite medical practitioner. Some are talking politics, some discussing the more important topics of the parish; some are playing whist, others boring, others being bored; while for the

entertainment of those who like to hear music without the trouble of listening to it, an excellent Erard is kept going vigorously at intervals. To enumerate everybody present would be as tedious as Homer's catalogue of ships; but there is just one other guest, who, being an important person in our narrative, must not be omitted. Neither boring nor being bored, but sitting somewhat apart, absorbed in a magnificent volume of illuminations, is a young lad of nineteen. His thick, dark, curly hair falls in not ungraceful disorder over a clear, well-shaped brow; his bright, soft eyes are of that dense grey which flashes coal-black when turned from the light, and the general characteristic of his face is an expression of almost childlike innocence. Altogether he is a decidedly pretty-looking little fellow, though he is wanting in that manliness of appearance which is the usual attribute of English youths. When spoken to, he replies with smiling alacrity, but does not carry on the conversation, being glad to relapse into his close study of the brilliant book before him. He gives one rather the impression of living in a world of his own; a casual glance is all he bestows upon the gay scene in which he finds himself, though his eye occasionally rests for a brief second upon the ecclesiastics present with an expression of mingled humour and perplexity.

"And what, my dear Lady Sharp," says the insinuating voice of Mr. Leech, as he takes a seat of privileged proximity by the side of his patroness, having at length released Eric from his toils,—"what, my dear Lady Sharp, is your opinion of the new young man?"

"Well, I haven't seen him yet," replied Lady Sharp, turning graciously towards her spiritual adviser. "He called yesterday when I happened to be out; but I expect him every minute. You know that he was at the same school as my son; though Eric was then a little boy and Mr. Tresham a big one. He is strongly recommended by Sir Jupiter Rampant, and there is every reason to hope that he will turn out well."

"I am sure I hope he may," rejoined the pastor, with a deprecating smile. "But infidelity, as might be expected, is spreading fast among the so-called clergy of the Establishment, and young men without serious convictions are sadly open to its influence. Is the young man sound as regards the essentials of the faith?"

"Sir Jupiter assures me that his views are beyond all question," answered Lady Sharp; "otherwise you may be sure I should never have taken so decided a step as to present him with the living. Perhaps, however," she

added thoughtfully, "it would have been as well if you had seen him first."

"Oh, let us hope for the best," was the mollified reply. "How wisely things are ordered! To think of the pulpit of a corrupt Church being at the disposal of so gracious a soul as yourself! And how blessed the thought that the proud Establishment is, through you, dependent for one of its ministers upon our own little body of believers!"

"I fancy the Church people would scarcely share your gratitude for that," remarked her ladyship, with a sardonic smile.

"Why, of course not," replied Mr. Leech complacently. "But what a privilege for us! How mysterious are His ways! And yet, you know, the treasure is often put into earthen vessels. Supposing, now, my dear sister—of course I am only putting a case—but supposing that this young man should prove latitudinarian in his views: or even imbued with the poison of Romish superstition? What an occasion for the enemy to blaspheme! What a stumbling-block even for our own cause! Have you given any thought to this side of the question, my dear lady?"

"I have considered the question in *all* its bearings," snapped Lady Sharp, who did not relish being called an earthen vessel by anybody except herself. "Wasn't that

the hall-door?" she continued, as a bang was heard outside. "Perhaps here he is at last."

"I am sure I shall be very pleased to see the young man," said Mr. Leech in a spirit of much meekness. "It is not well to judge another, lest we be judged ourselves. How striking is the panegyric pronounced by the Apostle——"

"The Reverend Arthur Tresham."

A dead silence fell upon the entire room as this announcement was made, and every head was turned in the direction of the door as it opened to admit a young man, about twenty-seven years of age, in plain evening dress. Mr. Tresham was of middle height, intelligent-looking rather than handsome, with crisp brown hair, firm mouth shaded by a small moustache, and quick, clear eyes. He gave a rapid glance round the room as he entered, and, singling out the conspicuous figure of Lady Sharp, advanced to meet her in due form. Lady Sharp rose from her chair, and shuffled majestically across the room with outstretched hand. "Welcome to Heathercombe, Mr. Tresham," she said, with a fair show of cordiality. Then there was a little buzz, as the ceremony of introduction to a few of the more prominent guests was gone through, and the interrupted conversations were gradually resumed.

Tresham then took his seat on the sofa beside his hostess, who forthwith entered into conversation with him. At a short distance from them stood Mr. Leech, blinking furtively at the new arrival through his blue spectacles. He made a mental note of the unclerical costume, which, to speak the truth, had created no small impression on others besides himself; he watched the changing lines on the face of Lady Sharp, and marked the quiet ease of the young clergyman's bearing with mingled envy and distrust. The open waistcoat, he judged, indicated a most decided leaning towards Broad Church. An Oxford collar and flapless coat would have been equally open to criticism; for him, there was not much to choose between the two schools represented by the two styles, for both were outside the pale of his own fellowship. Nothing could be detected of the impression made on Lady Sharp, for she had on her company manners, and was not the woman to betray herself in the face of so many witnesses, whatever she might feel. But of one thing Mr. Leech felt certain; the new incumbent was well able to hold his own, and, in the event of any opposition, would most emphatically do so. The conclusion at which he arrived, subject of course to future observations, was that Lady Sharp had caught a Tartar of the purest breed.

Meanwhile Tresham was the object of considerable interest on the part of the other guests. His unfortunate secular costume had attracted much attention, and given rise to no small amount of comment. Mrs. Buxom, the stout brewer's wife, shook her head gently to and fro, wonderingly; never, she thought, had she seen a clergyman who looked so exactly like anybody else. She, good woman, did not dream of criticising, but she was one of those persons who pass their lives in a state of perpetual surprise, and never get quite accustomed to the world they live in. The impression made on Dr. Urquhart, the physician, was somewhat different. He was a tall, dark-eyed, observant man, who spoke little but thought much; who seldom went to church, and openly took in the *Fortnightly Review*. What puzzled him was, not that a clergyman should wear an open waistcoat and evening coat, but that the man he was scrutinising so quietly should have become a clergyman at all. Dr. Urquhart was a little of a physiognomist in his way, and the judgment which gradually formed itself in his mind respecting the future relations of Mr. Tresham and Lady Sharp was substantially the same as that arrived at by Mr. Leech. He sat watching the two for some time with a faint expression of amusement on his lips, tapping the table noiselessly with the

points of his long fingers. Lady Sharp would every now and then throw out some remark of a tentative nature, with an inquiring smile; then draw her head back, with compressed chin, and keep her pale green eyes fixed searchingly on Tresham as she waited for and weighed his answer. If any idea could be conveyed of the tenor of the discourse by watching the gestures and expression of the speakers, it certainly looked as though the lady were firing off a succession of posers, or what were intended to be such, for the *tâtonnement* of Mr. Tresham. He, on his side, looked courteously unconcerned, and appeared to give such answers as came uppermost without the slightest hesitation or embarrassment.

"By the way," said Lady Sharp, suddenly turning the corner of a conversation of which she seemed to have had enough, "I don't think you have made the acquaintance of Mr. Leech. This is Mr. Tresham," she continued, turning to the elder man, and indicating Tresham with an outward sweep of her hand. "Mr. Tresham—Mr. Leech!"

Tresham acknowledged the introduction with a quiet bow; but Mr. Leech thrust out his hand effusively, and insisted on an impressive shake. "I suppose we may be considered labourers in the same vineyard, Sir," he said,

condescendingly, "though we work with different tools and in different methods. Now I am always interested in those I don't agree with; I like to make a study of them. Besides, I've always thought that young pastors require a word in season now and then, and I love to give the benefit of my experience to those who are beginning their Christian course. It's a precious privilege that I enjoy."

"Do you often avail yourself of it?" asked Tresham.

"In season and out of season," replied Mr. Leech, with unconscious truth. Lady Sharp had meanwhile withdrawn to the farther end of the room, and the two were now standing together near the fireplace. "I have no doubt that you, my dear young friend, often feel the need of guidance. I am sure that I do; I am sure we all do; and where is the use of fellowship, if not for mutual support? There is not one of us who can say to another, 'I have no need of thee.' We all need each other; we should all be precious to each other; we should all lean upon each other. Why, think of our dear friend Lady Sharp; what a tower of strength she is!"

"And do you lean much on her?" asked Tresham.

"We *all* lean upon her, my dear Sir," replied Mr. Leech, with an impressive sinking of the voice. "Her spiritual

power is great. She has been blessed with a rich abundance of very precious gifts. She is a gracious soul—a very gracious soul. It is a dear privilege to minister to her in spiritual things."

"And I suppose she ministers to the Church in carnal things?" said Tresham, with unmoved gravity of face.

"Indeed she does, Mr. Tresham," replied he of the Little Hill with fervour. "She has an open hand to all of us, never forgetting the poor of the flock in their distress. It is to be feared her children do not take after her as much as one could wish. They have, indeed, much of the attractiveness and graces of the natural man; but what evidence have they ever given of the grace which cometh from above?"

"That is a matter upon which I should hesitate to pronounce," said Tresham; "on such a subject I naturally defer to your more mature experience."

"And that experience is always at your service," replied Mr. Leech, on whom Tresham was fast making a rather favourable impression. It is strange that it should have been so, but so it was. It seemed to him that his young brother showed a far less aggressive spirit than he had been prepared for, and he beamed and blinked complacently through his blue glasses. He was just meditating

a fresh delivery upon the subject of carnal graces, when Dr. Urquhart remarked—

"I have always thought that one of the wisest sayings in the Bible is that which tells us that to everything there is a season; and among others, a time to keep silence and a time to speak. But, like all wise sayings, it is sadly apt to be forgotten."

Mr. Leech blushed purple. He had no idea his words had been overheard, and he writhed under this cool exposure. Dr. Urquhart, however, seemingly quite unconscious of his discomfiture, went on—

"I make the remark because I have just received a very stinging application of it to myself. I was unfortunate enough a moment ago to ask our friend Miss Heath here, knowing her to be an authority, what in her opinion was the first of the Christian graces. 'Silence,' she replied. Was ever an unlucky man more cruelly shut up?"

"Now, Dr. Urquhart, I didn't believe you could be so wicked," retorted our friend of the scarlet-and-white dress, joining in the laugh which the doctor had raised against himself. "You know perfectly well I intended it as a compliment, for nobody could ever accuse *you* of being a chatterbox. But why appeal to me? Surely

Mr. St. Jerome and Mr. Leech ought to be better authorities than I."

"What do you say, Mr. Leech?" said Dr. Urquhart, bending his dark, grave eyes scrutinisingly on the chapel minister. "Which is the first of all Christian graces in your opinion?"

"Faith," said Mr. Leech promptly. "Faith, faith. And why? First, because faith saves us; we are justified by faith. Secondly, because, like godliness, it is profitable for the life which now is, and not only for that which is to come. For years, my friends, I lived on faith when other resources failed, and never lacked a meal."

"He's living on charity now, at all events," muttered Eric in a dangerously loud aside to Tresham, who was viewing the scene with great amusement. "When he's cleaned out the mater, he'll have to change his tack again, and live on hope; and he won't get fat on that, I fancy."

"I can quite believe it, Sir," remarked Dr. Urquhart replying to Mr. Leech, in a gravely ironical tone. "Certainly in your case the exercise of faith has been attended with most satisfactory results. But what do you say to charity—the charity which, as your Bible puts it, seeketh not her own, and thinketh no evil of others?"

"That's into him!" chuckled Eric in Tresham's ear. Miss Heath's eyes twinkled, and even Giraldi looked up with interest. Mrs. Buxom folded her hands decorously upon her lap, with a vague impression that the conversation was taking a religious turn, and that it behoved her in consequence to behave as though she were in church.

"Charity," said Mr. Leech, after a moment's pause, "is a very precious grace when rightly directed, but one which may easily become a snare. Much that the world calls charity, and commends as such, is simple laxity and disregard for the essential principles of truth. It springs from carelessness of what we should hold most closely, and too frequently is used to condone soul-destroying error. In the second place, charity never saved a human soul, nor ever will, nor ever can. Therefore it cannot be ranked as high as faith."

"What you say, Sir, respecting the frequent misdirection of charity has my cordial approbation," replied Dr. Urquhart gravely, but with the slightest possible gleam of humour in his eye as he glanced towards Eric. "Charity is too often misapplied, an error which cannot be too much deplored. But surely it is not for you to depreciate it as a grace, even as a saving

grace. Are you not told that charity is a fulfilling of the law?"

"Ah! but my dear Sir," rejoined the minister, "we are not living under the law. That makes all the difference, you see. Charity, in an unregenerate man, is simply a pitfall and a vice; an amiable vice, if you like, but still a vice. When a man has nothing but charity to fall back upon, I cannot conceal it from myself that he is in a very serious condition."

"Do you mean his own charity, or somebody else's, Mr. Leech?" inquired Captain Ricochet mischievously. "Much would depend on that, you know, especially in questions of practical advantage to oneself," he added with a bland smile, as Mr. Leech did not reply at once. But Dr. Urquhart, seeing that the discussion was going further than he had intended, put a stop to it by remarking quietly that, although they differed about words, he had no doubt their disagreement was not radical, and that for his part he was much indebted to Mr. Leech for so able an exposition of his views.

"By the way, Tresham, didn't you say you wanted to meet Giraldi?" said Eric Charteris. "There he is; come and let me introduce him to you."

"Willingly," replied Tresham, as he prepared to follow

Eric to where Giraldi was sitting. "Why, what a child he looks!"

"Child? He's a baby," rejoined Eric *sotto voce*. "You never saw such a stupid little muff. Come, Giraldi, wake up, and let me introduce you to Mr. Tresham."

Giraldi slowly raised his head from the picture he was studying, with a somewhat dazed expression; then, as he saw Tresham standing by with an expectant smile, his face suddenly lighted up, and rising quickly from his chair, he said, in a piping, flute-like voice—

"Oh, I am so glad to see you, Mr. Tresham. You know Sir Jupiter, don't you? I'm his ward, you know; and he told me you were coming to live in Heathercombe. How long have you been here?"

"Only two days," said Tresham, "otherwise we should no doubt have met before. You know that it is through your guardian that I have been appointed to the district church."

"How curious!" rejoined Giraldi. "I mean, not that he should have given it you, but—well, never mind. But I'm very glad you're going to stay here. You'll come and see me sometimes, won't you?"

"Certainly I will," said Tresham, watching him with

some interest. "What do you generally do with yourself all day?"

"Oh, I study most of the time," replied Giraldi. "Father Aloysius teaches me; you know I'm a Roman Catholic, I suppose. And then I'm learning modelling and sculpture; and I go out sketching."

"Are you fond of art?" inquired Tresham.

"Yes, I love it," answered the boy. "You've never been in Rome, have you? I was there for three years when I was little, and I've got some beautiful plaster casts of the principal statues in the Vatican, which I'm trying to copy. Father Aloysius is a splendid sculptor, and he helps me. You've heard of him, haven't you?"

"Sir Jupiter mentioned him to me the other day," said Tresham, smiling. "Do you often sketch from nature?"

"Oh yes," replied Giraldi. "And I've been trying to draw our altar-piece lately—the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. You know the Blessed Virgin, don't you? I'm sure you'd admire the picture; it's a Correggio. Won't you come and see it some day? And then I'll introduce you to Father Aloysius."

"With great pleasure," answered Tresham. Then, quickly

changing the subject,—"Do you know many of the people here to-night?"

"Yes, nearly all of them a little," replied Giraldi; "but none very intimately. I think they don't like me very much; they fancy I'm a Jesuit, or something of the sort. You can't think how bitter they are against the Church."

"I shouldn't wonder. But that Dr. Urquhart seems a superior sort of man."

"Oh, so he is," assented the lad with warmth. "He's a shocking infidel, they say; I don't think he believes in anything. But he never laughs at other people, whatever they may believe. He's ever so much nicer than that Mr. Leech."

"What, isn't Mr. Leech nice?" pursued Tresham, amused.

"I think he's dreadful," said Giraldi. "I don't believe even that he is good. And then he hates Catholics so. I've heard him curse the Pope!"

"I dare say," said Tresham. "Many people's religion consists chiefly in anathematising those who differ from them. It's only human nature. Mr. Leech is a great friend of Lady Sharp's, isn't he?"

"I believe so," said Giraldi. "At least, he's always here, they say; and Lady Sharp appears to have great faith in what he tells her. But, dear me, it's nearly ten o'clock,

and I promised Father Aloysius I wouldn't be later than half-past. I must run for it. You won't mind my leaving you so abruptly? We'll meet again soon, I hope."

"Of course," replied Tresham. "Look here! have you any engagement for to-morrow? Why not come and lunch with me at one, and have a stretch over the hills afterwards?"

"Nothing would delight me more," replied Giraldi; "but I'm afraid it's quite impossible. I never dine out on Fridays. I shouldn't be able to do justice to your fare either, if I did. You don't think I'm rude, do you?"

"Certainly not," said Tresham. "It was most stupid of me not to think of it. Could you come on Monday?"

"Yes, that I can, and shall be quite enchanted," answered Giraldi, with great naïveté. "On Monday, then—good-night!"

Tresham, as he watched the receding figure of his new acquaintance, thought he certainly was the freshest and most original character he had met that evening. The boy struck him as having an impressionable and confiding nature, that might easily be influenced with the exercise of proper tact. His religion was evidently a tender point; and there was something just a little pathetic in the fact that to his religion was to be attributed his manifest isolation. These

people evidently fought shy of him on account of it. Split up into all sorts of factions themselves, they all agreed in looking coldly upon the benighted little Papist who lived among them. There was much truth, then, in what Sir Jupiter had said. The little sympathy that Giraldi met with among the residents of the neighbourhood was having the very natural effect of throwing him back more than ever upon his religion, and increasing the influence of the priest; and Tresham determined that he would do all in his power to restore things to a juster balance.

"A charming little fellow, isn't he, Sir?" suddenly said a rasping voice at his elbow. Tresham turned sharply round, and confronted a stout lady, with a smile on her face and a cast in her eye, whom he had not before observed. She might have been about thirty-five; her dress was cheap, and rather pretentious, and she wore strong spectacles. "I think I've not 'ad the pleasure of being introduced," she continued, without the least embarrassment. "Allow me to present myself. My name is Hash—Miss Hash."

Tresham murmured something to the effect that he was very pleased to hear it.

"And 'ow do you like 'eathercombe?" was the original inquiry which followed. "I suppose you've 'ardly been

'ere long enough to judge. Quite right to suspend your judgment. I always suspend mine. Don't you admire Lady Sharp? Such a good woman! In mourning, too—didn't it strike you that her ladyship was in mourning, Sir?"

The fact had not escaped Mr. Tresham's observation, and he confessed as much.

"Ah! yes; poor dear Sir John!" continued the lady who called herself Miss Hash, in despairing tones. "Well, it's what we must all come to, I suppose. And Mr. Leech—you have seen Mr. Leech, Sir? Such an excellent man; such a support to dear Lady Sharp. You observed it, Sir? Of course you did. An enlightened Christian—shouldn't you say that he was an enlightened Christian, Sir?"

"He seems to hold rather peculiar views," said Tresham, carelessly.

"Oh, *doesn't* he? Most peculiar, I assure you. I have always remarked it," replied Miss Hash, with earnestness. "I felt sure you would agree with me. It's so nice to 'ave one's opinion supported; so satisfactory, you know. And young Mr. Charteris, too; a fine youth, I think, Sir? Quite the gay young man. Very clever, I'm told. Takes after 'is lady-mother, I make no doubt."

"I have always thought," replied Tresham, speaking in ponderous and measured tones, "that the young gentleman

you refer to afforded a remarkable exemplification of that predominance of the physical over the intellectual which is so distinguishing a characteristic of the upper middle classes in the population of the British Isles."

"*Quite* my own idea!" responded Miss Hash, in irrepressible delight. "Just what I was going to say, only you put it so much more beautifully than me. I really never did! Oh yes, I'm sure he's very intellectual, as you say; extremely so. And you take such an extended view; it's really quite refreshing. I'm afraid, Sir, you won't find very much intellectual society of your own stamp in 'eathercombe."

"You seem to live in great harmony, at all events," said Tresham, as the hard-worked piano began to hammer out the prelude to 'Some asked me where the rubies grew,' and Beatrice Heath, Mr. St. Jerome, and Captain Ricochet prepared to sing that charming trio. "What a pretty song that is!"

"Indeed, it's quite one of my special favourites too," agreed Miss Hash, who had never heard it in her life before, and would certainly not have recognised it if she had. "Do you know who wrote it, Sir?"

"Herrick," replied Tresham.

"Herrick! ! !" almost screamed Miss Hash; "impos-

sible! Why, I'd no idea he was so clever! Is it a great secret, Mr. Tresham? Does Lady Sharp know? Oh, *do* let me tell her, Sir. I do love to surprise people so. Well, to think of it now! Of all people in the world! Is it a secret, Sir?"

"You are at liberty to tell all creation as far as I am concerned," said Tresham; "though I scarcely think it will excite the surprise you seem to anticipate. What is there so extraordinary about it? Were you not aware that it was one of Herrick's songs?"

But Miss Hash was no longer by his side. She was already half way across the room, her spectacles gleaming like a brace of engine-lights as she threaded her way excitedly through the company towards the corner occupied by Lady Sharp. Tresham looked after her in blank bewilderment. "She is certainly crazed," he thought, as he watched her broad back disappearing in the crowd. Then he observed a stir and slight commotion near the piano, as the singers were dispersing. There was a lull, followed by an effusive whispering; a half-burst of repressed laughter, and then a 'Hush-sh-sh'-ing, with a murmur of voices, in which he thought he caught the sound of his own name. A moment afterwards Beatrice Heath, to whom he had been introduced on entering, separated

herself from the group, and, moving a few steps towards a spot which happened to be vacant, gave Tresham the opportunity he wanted.

"Miss Heath," he said, going up to her, "I wish you would be good enough to take pity on my ignorance. Who or what is Miss Hash?"

"Do you mean a lady who introduced herself to you under that name?" returned Miss Heath, with dancing eyes.

"No other," replied Tresham, smiling. "Did you see her do it?"

"Oh no," said Miss Heath. "I only conclude that she introduced herself from the way in which you pronounce her name. She spells it A-s-h-e."

"Ashe?" exclaimed Tresham. "How very singular she should have misled me so! I've been calling her Hash for the last ten minutes—at least, I should have done so if I'd mentioned her name at all."

"Curious name, isn't it?" continued Miss Heath, demurely. "Eric Charteris calls her Cinderella. I wonder what it means."

"Probably it's a corruption of Ashtaroth," suggested Tresham.

"It wouldn't be so bad if her own name were the only

word she ever made a hash of," said Miss Heath. "What *have* you been telling her, Mr. Tresham? She has just announced, on your authority, that that trio of ours was composed by Eric Charteris. What do you suppose she means?"

"She asked me who wrote the song, and I told her Herrick, of course," said Tresham.

"Delicious!" exclaimed Miss Heath, with a burst of ringing laughter. "How stupid of us never to think of that! That woman will be the death of me some day, I know she will. Somebody ought to write a book about her, I declare."

"But what is she?" asked Tresham.

"She's a sort of professional hanger-on," replied Beatrice. "She has all kinds of names given her. People use her as a sort of *quatorzième;* and really it's what she's just fit for. She hires herself out, so to speak, by the day, or the month, or the season. If Lady Sharp wants to give a tea-meeting at the chapel, Miss Ashe is retained to cut the bread-and-butter, decorate the walls, and help to pour out the tea; if the Duchess gives one of her open-air entertainments—garden-parties, she calls them—Miss Ashe is busy for a week beforehand making soup, baking pies, arranging flowers, and, I believe, helping to mow the lawn. That

she's a most useful member of society I admit; but somehow she is not quite so much appreciated as she deserves. You'll find her invaluable, Mr. Tresham, if ever you want any help in church decoration or frivolities of that sort; I see she has already fixed you with her eye."

"Thank you sincerely for the warning," answered Tresham; "I shall keep on my guard. Strange, though, that so valuable a person should never have been appropriated, isn't it?"

"Her value to society would be gone at once if any one did succeed in monopolising her," returned Beatrice; "but she has been spared to us all these years, and we ought to be duly thankful. I believe she actually did have an 'affair' of some sort once, poor thing—many years ago. It's a pity Mr. Leech doesn't take a fancy to her; I'm sure she'd suit him admirably."

"They would make an excellent couple," said Tresham; "but I expect it would be as much as his place is worth. No man can serve two masters, and he's well enough off as it is, apparently."

"What censorious wretches we are!" cried Beatrice. "And you're a long way the worse of the two, Mr. Tresham, for it's your business to set us all an example. By the way, have you met your colleague Mr. St. Jerome yet?"

"I have only been introduced," said Tresham; "I have had no opportunity of conversation. He's 'High,' is he not?"

"Wears lace surplices and eats no butter on Fridays," replied Beatrice; "that's 'High,' isn't it?"

"High? It's rank——rank Popery, I mean," said Tresham. Beatrice was not quite sure whether he was in jest or earnest. She cast a momentary side-glance at him, wondering whether she would like him as much in the future as she felt inclined to then. Tresham, on his side, liked her almost as well as he did Dr. Urquhart; which meant a vast deal better than most of his new acquaintances. He recognised in her a certain strength of individuality that pleased him, an independence as well as a frankness which distinguished her from the majority of her age and sex. There was nothing masculine about Beatrice Heath, but there was much that was vigorous and strong. As far as he could judge from so brief a period of observation, she seemed to be characterised more by the stronger and more solid qualities of womanhood than by those pretty weaknesses which are so attractive to most men, and he was conscious of an incipient liking for her that bade fair to ripen into friendship. Just then supper was announced, and they found themselves going in together.

Lady Sharp was already seated at the table, watching her guests eat. Supper was the feature of her evenings that she disliked the most. "What! feeding again?" she would mutter to herself as the meal was announced. But to do her justice, she always made suitable provision for the lower natures of her guests, and was partially consoled by the superiority she felt over the masticating crowd around her. Tresham, as he took his seat, placed Miss Heath upon his left; on his right was Edith Charteris, and opposite to him sat Dr. Urquhart, dividing Mrs. Buxom from Miss Ashe.

"We have scarcely seen you all the evening, Mr. Tresham," said Edith, when the meal was about half over. "I hope you found something to amuse you; or have you been very dull?"

"Oh, Mr. Tresham has been quite too delightful," cut in Miss Ashe, irrelevantly, before Tresham could reply. "We had a most intellectual conversation, didn't we, Mr. Tresham? I don't think I was ever so much amused before."

"Then I must congratulate myself upon having entertained an angel unawares," responded the new clergyman, in rather a dry voice.

"Miss Charteris, let me send you some of this cold

chicken," said Dr. Urquhart. "Miss Ashe can recommend it; can't you, Miss Ashe?" he added, turning to that lady, whose distended cheeks bore witness to the havoc she was making among such provisions as were within her reach.

"Indeed I can," replied the *quatorzième*, cordially. "Do take some, my dear. It eat very plump and short."

"Lady Sharp, mayn't I help you to something?" inquired Tresham, seeing that his hostess had nothing on her plate.

"Oh dear no, thank you," replied her ladyship, with a superior smile; "I never take supper. Mrs. Buxom, I hope you are well supplied?"

"Thank you, my lady, I'm doing beautiful," said Mrs. Buxom, in rather a wheezy voice. "Miss Edith, dear," she continued, bending over the table, "won't Mr. Tresham take a glass o' porter? There's nothing so strengthenin' for young folks as porter, and he don't look over hearty."

Tresham, to whom the question was laughingly referred by Edith, declined the proffered support. Whereupon Mrs. Buxom proceeded to fill a glass for herself, and complacently drank it off; a process which seemed to be

attended with such satisfactory results to her spirits generally, that she grew almost playful, and began to rally Tresham on his supposed teetotalism.

"It's a good example you mean to set, Sir, I am sure," said the old lady, nodding her head in a friendly manner; "but I don't believe in total abstinence for young people. Now there's Miss Edith, there. Why, I can't ever get her to take a thimbleful of anything, though we've always wine in plenty on the sideboard, red and white; and don't she look as though it'd do her good? Now, Sir, you're a clergyman, and know your Bible, sure enough. Well, then, if Timothy was told to take a glass o' wine now and again for his stomach's sake, and him a bishop, I don't see as how any young curate can go far wrong in following his example."

"Ah! but you forget the context, Mrs. Buxom," said Tresham, humouring the old lady. "It is stated that Timothy had a weak digestion, and my belief is that the wine he was ordered to take was pepsine. Time enough for that when I'm troubled with dyspepsia."

"A most valuable suggestion," remarked Dr. Urquhart, gravely. "I believe, further, that all temperance theologians agree in the theory that the wine generally referred to in the New Testament was a species of unfermented

syrup, which might make a man very sick, but could never make him tipsy."

"Pepsine and syrup!" retorted Mrs. Buxom, with fine scorn. "Don't tell me, doctor; you can't gammon me that way. Which d'ye think it was, now, that was made at that weddin' we read about in John? It's a pity for you temperance folk the Lord didn't turn the wine into water; but you see He turned the water into wine, and the people 'ud never 'ave smacked their lips over it as they did if it 'ad been anything like the doctor's stuff you talk about. No, no, Sir; depend upon it, it was something to make glad the heart of man, and not to turn his stomach."

"Ably argued, my dear Mrs. Buxom," replied the Doctor, pleasantly. "You have made a thorough convert of me, and, I may venture to say, of Mr. Tresham too," he added, as he saw Tresham raising a glass of claret to his lips. "But you will have to extend the sphere of your propaganda pretty considerably, I expect, for I'm told they're getting up a Total Abstinence Eleven at the cricket-club, and that they expect it to beat the non-abstaining cricketers hollow in one innings. What do you say to that?"

"An admirable project truly," said Tresham, amused

at the contempt depicted on Mrs. Buxom's benevolent round face. "To be followed, no doubt, by the formation of a Vegetarian Rifle Brigade, or a Homœopathic Choral Society. There's nothing like a happy association of ideas."

"Don't you pay any attention to their nonsense, Mrs. Buxom," interposed Edith, pitying the good lady's bewilderment. "They're neither of them teetotalers themselves, and they don't mean a word of what they say."

"Well," exclaimed Miss Ashe, "I never knew that chloral was a homœopathic medicine before; but one lives and learns. How very instructive, now! Don't you find Mr. Tresham's conversation very instructive, Miss Edith, dear?"

"Beatrice, do say something," gasped Edith from behind her handkerchief. "You've not spoken a word all supper-time."

"I've been listening to the instructive conversation around me," replied Beatrice, without raising her eyes from the mince-pie she was discussing. "Go on, pray; I wouldn't interrupt it for the world."

"That's not fair, Miss Heath," said Dr. Urquhart. "You have no right to being improved if you don't help

to improve others. That's sheer egotism, and quite opposed to the altruistic theories of the age."

There is no knowing by what scathing retort Miss Heath might have displayed her capabilities for altruism in the shape of repartee, had not the conversation been interrupted by a general move. Lady Sharp rose from the table with a sigh of relief, and called up the least reluctant smiles of the evening in wishing her guests good-night. Dr. Urquhart offered Tresham a cigar and his company for part of the way home, both of which were frankly accepted. Miss Heath packed herself into a cosy little brougham and drove rapidly away, while Mr. Leech lingered till the last to take an unctuous leave of his dear patroness and sister.

CHAPTER III.

MORE ABOUT HEATHERCOMBE.

It is, I think, advisable, for the clear understanding of what is to follow, that my readers should receive a fuller idea of Heathercombe and its inhabitants than can be gleaned from the fugitive scraps of conversation recorded in the preceding chapter. I therefore crave their indulgence for the next few pages, while I enter into such particulars and explanations as are necessary to my design.

Heathercombe was a small market-town of some six thousand inhabitants, prettily situated at the foot of the Craigie Hills amid the rich pasture-lands of Westlandshire. Its name was derived from the heather-covered combes of the Craigies, while through it flowed the little river Isbourne, famous for its trout. It consisted, at the time of which I write, mainly of two long, broad, clean streets, intersecting each other at right angles, lined with rather low-roofed houses, built principally of stone. In ancient times it had been a place of considerable importance. It

had boasted a frowning castle, inhabited by a belted earl and his turbulent retainers; and there had been a grand old abbey, with a mitred abbot and three hundred monks of the Benedictine Order, who had chanted their orisons daily and nightly for five centuries without interruption until the suppression of monasteries under King Henry the Eighth. The only vestige of Heathercombe's ancient glories which had survived the changes of time was the parish church, a fine Gothic building dating from the reign of Henry the Sixth, the most remarkable feature of which was an embattled tower at the east end, opening by a high arch into the nave. But the Heathercombe of modern times, if less romantic than the Heathercombe of yore, was a far more practical and busy place. There was a fine town-hall, which imparted an air of no small dignity to the street in which it stood; a grammar-school, where the education offered was of a high order; two churches besides the parish church, all well filled on Sundays; several chapels of different denominations, and a Roman Catholic oratory. These, with the Literary and Scientific Institute, and a Guardroom as head-quarters of the local Volunteer corps, comprised the public buildings of the town, affording no meagre evidence of the mental activity and public spirit of the inhabitants.

Now the Rector of the parish, the Rev. Chauncey Fairweather, was an eminent member of what is generally called the old school. He did not hunt, it is true, being afflicted with chalk-stones; but he came up to most of the requirements of an old-school parson in his partiality for purchased sermons and superior port. In consequence of this, he was condemned by the more ardent of his clerical brethren as a dumb dog, whose flock was reprehensibly neglected; and there is no doubt that the virulent luxuriance of Nonconformity in the once faithful parish of Heathercombe was owing in no small degree to his lethargy. Mr. Fairweather held to two great articles of faith—the Queen and the Church of England; and so long as he was on good terms with both these powers, he felt comfortably assured of his own safety, as well for the body as the soul. He hated dissent, as became a loyal Churchman; but the greatest abhorrence he felt towards anything was reserved for the Church of Rome. The deadliest schism of all, he was wont to say in a joke which lasted him for many years, was Catholicism. When confined to the house with gout, he excused himself from appearing in public on the plea that he could not endure to run the risk of meeting that hydra, Father Aloysius; vowing that, in his opinion, such was the bribery practised by the priests among his poorer parishioners under the name

of charities, the parish deserved spiritual disfranchisement at the hands of an Ecclesiastical Commission. Dissenters he regarded much as a Tory land-proprietor regards self-made Radicals, his feelings towards them being a mixture of contempt and fear. But to do the good man justice, he troubled himself really but little about anything which did not interfere with his personal well-being, and derived much comfort from the reflection that, whatever might be in store for the Establishment, it would at any rate last out his day. He was an elderly man, and corpulent; and he showed much wisdom in not permitting the storms which raged around his Church to disturb either his appetite or his repose.

A remarkable contrast to the chief pastor of Heathercombe was afforded by the Rev. Jabez Insight, minister of the Independent chapel. He was a very short, spare man, with a head too large for his body; not only according to the canons of physical proportion, but also in the sense that much material which would have been more useful as flesh and blood had perversely run to brain. A careless observer might have spoken of him as an ugly little fellow; but all superficial homeliness disappeared like magic when once the inner being of the man was called forth into play. Being a man of scholarship and wide reading, he was an

admirable talker; and, while he talked, the large grey eyes would sparkle, and the broad, knotted brow rise and fall, as the mobile mouth, instinct with expression, poured forth its wealth of words. It was only when at rest that his face was plain; no sooner was the right chord struck, than the keen intellect within sprang, as it were, into visible activity, transfiguring each rugged feature with the glow of a divine fire. Yet for all this, Mr. Insight's ministry was not successful. He preached far over the heads of his congregation, and puzzled where he sought to edify. When he told them, in the course of one of his sermons, that human nature was "a casket of impatient necessities,—urgencies of instinct, affection, reason, and faith, the pressure of which against the inertia of the Present determined the living movements, and sustained the permanent unrest, of Life," he failed to realise the fact that Mrs. Rabbits, the deacon's wife, to say nothing of Rabbits himself, was just about as much impressed by it as she would have been by the enunciation of a theorem in Euclid. The only impatient necessity of which that worthy couple were clearly conscious was that for the punctual payment of their weekly bills; and poor Mr. Insight, I am grieved to say, was often a little behindhand in this respect, for his embarrassments were not a few. And yet his congregation were proud of

him, and loved him too, in spite of their inability to understand his sermons, by reason of the sweetness of his nature; enduring with equanimity the taunts of the neighbouring Baptist flock upon the carnal learning of their minister, and paying him his poor salary with good-will. Besides, if they could not soar as high as he did, there were others in the town who could. Dr. Urquhart was not unfrequently to be seen in one of the back-pews, listening attentively to old Insight's perorations; and it was well known that he was honoured by the friendship of two very high and mighty personages—soon to be introduced to my readers—who made no secret of their cordial appreciation of his talents. The respect and countenance thus accorded to the minister by the rank and intellect of the neighbourhood went far to mitigate any feeling of dissatisfaction which might exist, on the part of his own people, at the want of mental touch between him and them.

The Baptists constituted a larger and a richer body than the Independents. Bethabara Chapel, as their meeting-house was called, had been endowed by a deceased member of the flock some years before, and had continued to prosper greatly ever since under the pastorate of the Rev. Israel Doom. The doctrines preached from the pulpit of Bethabara were ultra-Calvinistic. Never was the gospel

invitation heard within its walls, declaring that whosoever would might come ; never was the preacher heard to utter so dangerous and lax a doctrine as that Christ died to save the world. The favourite topic of the Rev. Mr. Doom was the marvellous love and wisdom of the Almighty in having chosen him, the Rev. Mr. Doom, and the other members of Bethabara Chapel, from before the foundation of the world ; in having appointed so immense a majority of the human race to glorify Him throughout eternity by their shrieks and agonies in hell ; and in having deliberately created the entire universe in order that His purposes with regard to both the above-mentioned classes of His creatures, though then unborn, might conveniently be fulfilled. There was no lack of sympathy between this minister and his congregation ; no complaints that he preached over their heads, or dissatisfaction with any of the doctrines he advanced. All was as simple, straightforward, and agreeable as could be. Each member of the little flock felt so sure of his own election, so happy in the assurance, and so piously resigned as regarded the hideous fate in store for everybody else, that anything like discord was an impossibility. Besides, it was a well-to-do little flock, and there is a subtle connection, somehow or other, between spiritual complacency and fat living. The minister, however, was not a

very healthy-looking man. He had puffy, sallow cheeks, a dull eye, and a somewhat wheezy voice, suggesting a dyspeptic temperament; for he was given to heavy suppers, and was over-fond, perhaps, of rich cake and home-made wines. He was the idol of his congregation, though not much run after by outsiders; nor, indeed, was it likely that he should have been, for close communion was the rule at Bethabara, and strangers were but coldly welcomed. There was a story current in Heathercombe that one Sunday a worthy woman belonging to the Plymouth Brethren attended the service at the Baptist chapel. It was a Sacrament Sunday, and at the close of the sermon she naturally kept her seat. This attracted the attention of the deacons, who, after a whispered colloquy, dispatched one of their number to put the intruder to the test. At last, after a number of searching questions, the deacon said, "And do you break bread at Our table?"—"I break bread at the Lord's Table," replied the woman, wonderingly. This answer was not deemed satisfactory, and she was requested to retire.*

If, however, there was one of his ministering brethren with whom the Baptist pastor felt more sympathy than

* I believe this incident is recorded in the life of the Rev. Rowland Hill. It actually happened, however, to an acquaintance of the writer's at a certain Zoar Chapel in a well-known village in Kent.

with the others, it was the Rev. Mr. Leech. Both held the extremest and most rigorous form of Calvinism; indeed, it was said that Mr. Leech was a regular Antinomian. The points on which they differed were of too subtle and metaphysical a nature to give rise to any serious amount of mutual malediction, and they experienced a certain zest, rather than irritation, in expatiating upon their respective transcendentalisms to each other. Besides this, there was a precious bond of union between them in their judgment of their colleagues. Many were the complacent groans in which they indulged together over the gracelessness and earthliness of their Independent brother. Mr. Insight presented, in their eyes, the awful spectacle of one who had been drawn away from the simplicity of the truth by the seductions of carnal wisdom, and ungodly, because philosophical, speculations. They condemned his contemplative abstractions as a vain prying into things which might not be seen or heard, that tended to a puffing up of his fleshly mind. As for the Rev. Chauncey Fairweather, he was scarcely worth their anathemas. In their eyes he was no more than a paid servant of the state, and one who did as little work as he could for his salary. That he, and others of his sort in Heathercombe and elsewhere, should call themselves by the name of Christ, was, of course, little

short of blasphemy; but what could you expect? The world liked to have its religion for the sake of respectability, and Mr. Fairweather fulfilled such duties as were required of him to the satisfaction generally of his not very exacting employers. But to count him seriously as a soldier of the Church militant was too great a violation of language to be permitted for a moment.

In spite, however, of all the levelling tendencies thus recognisable in Heathercombe, it was, and always had been, an aristocratic little town. Anciently, as we have seen, its distinction had been undeniable; and when feudalism had passed away, and the belted earl and his descendants gone the way of all flesh, an even grander magnate had stepped into the vacant throne. The reigning lord of Heathercombe and half of Westlandshire besides was a certain wonderful nobleman, whose personality was shrouded in that distinguished vagueness which adds so strong a charm to traditional prestige. There are some personages whose dignity is of so ineffable a nature as to require that they should conceal themselves in order to preserve it; who are certainly supposed to breathe the common air like other people, and even to share the same physiological advantages and limitations as the lower orders of mankind, but under protest, as it were, and in a finer

and more ethereal sense. To this inscrutable and exalted class belonged that puissant prince Leofric, Duke of Grandchester, of Castle Sudds, Westlandshire, and Park Lane, Piccadilly. The Duke, it is scarcely necessary to say, seldom visited the country, preferring the perfumed atmosphere of Bond Street to the vulgar odours of turnip-tops and cows. No one in Heathercombe, belonging to the present generation, had ever seen the Duke. He was believed, though I know not on whose authority, to be a stoutish—Heaven forgive us!—to be characterised by a certain tendency to *embonpoint*, which, considering his Grace's years, was only right and suitable. His hair, of a pale reddish blonde, lay in well-curled locks on each side of a bald forehead; his eyes were of a somewhat faded blue; his carefully trimmed mutton-chop whiskers advanced, promontory-wise, into the middle of his cheeks, which glowed with a pink that never changed; his teeth were a miracle of brilliancy and whiteness. His mansion in Park Lane, which he had built himself, may be said to have belonged to the ambassadoric order of architecture, and, like its owner, was chiefly remarkable for smooth elegance. The Duke of Grandchester was a widower. He had married when only twenty-two, and his young wife died in giving birth to their second child after a short

reign of three years. She is said, poor thing, to have been rather a fast young woman, and to have cost her decorous husband much disquietude. The eyes of Heathercombe had been permitted to gaze upon her once. It is related that she appeared at a county ball soon after her marriage, dressed in a little brief authority and not much else to speak of; but that was the only occasion on which she had been permitted to reveal herself, for the Duke took her back to town next day, and she was never seen in Westlandshire again. She left behind her two children. The elder, Lord Pulvilio, represented the county in Parliament, and both he and his sister, Lady Gwendolen Honourbright, lived with their father in Park Lane. He was an indistinct-looking young man of thirty-two, with lavender eyes and pale buff hair, and a very careful drawl. No sprig of nobility in England was a greater master of cultivated apathy than he. It had been sedulously instilled into him from a child that there was no worse form than the display of interest or feeling of any kind; and so successful had been his lordship's education, that by the time he was of age he had very nearly reached the intellectual stature of a dormouse. In politics this noble family were of course Tory to the backbone, and firm supporters of Church and State. The Duke went to church on Sundays

in exactly the same frame of mind as that in which he went to court on levée days, regarding such attendance in both cases as a mark of loyalty to the respective Heads of the two institutions, which he was bound, by virtue of his high position, to concede. Beyond this, however, his Grace took no part in public matters. He considered, and perhaps wisely, that he could contribute nothing towards the maintenance of the established order of things more valuable than his own polished individuality; leaving to his accomplished son the duty of occasionally representing him in the more distant sphere of his domains.

It often happens, however, that the very thing people think they have the least reason to dread and the best reason to despise unexpectedly presents itself in a sudden and highly disagreeable form. Light as was the esteem in which the Duke held Heathercombe and all connected therewith, he by no means misprized the influence he believed himself to exercise over it; and had anybody hinted to him the possibility that that influence might some day be undermined, he would simply have raised his eyebrows at the impertinence of the supposition. But Dukes and Mikados must both condescend to some revelation of their personality if they wish to keep their power; and the vicarious discharge of this duty by the Tycoon,

Marquis of Pulvilio, had proved, alas! inadequate to the end in view. To put it with brutal frankness, the people of Heathercombe cared really no more for the Duke than the Duke professed to care for them; so that when another star rose upon their horizon, shedding warmer and brighter rays than had ever proceeded from the distant nebula they had been accustomed to regard as the centre of their system, it was not surprising that they transferred their allegiance to the new luminary at once and for ever. Who and what this interloping attraction was will be set forth in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HYACINTHS.

Some five or six years before the opening of this story, there had been no more familiar figure to the inhabitants of Walton Terrace, Camden Town, than that of the gentleman at No. 7. He was a man past middle-age, with a spare, bent frame, strongly-marked, plain features, a face deeply lined with thought, and rather dry demeanour. His clothes were spotlessly neat, and brushed till they were threadbare; he wore a high collar, and a black silk neckcloth passing two or three times round his throat. For some time his neighbours speculated about him in vain. That he had some regular occupation was evident, for he always left his house at nine o'clock in the morning, and returned about six in the afternoon. That he had a wife was also discovered before long. She was understood to be a tall, stout, handsome elderly lady, with a large brown face, long raven hair, and very eccentric manners. People who had seen her, in a scarlet shawl that she was partial to,

said they thought she must be an old gipsy queen who had turned respectable for fun. But all perplexity about the new arrivals was set at rest when one gossip, more eager than the others, announced, on the authority of the elderly lady's cook, that their name was Preston, and that the gentleman was on the Stock Exchange in London.

The promulgation of this authentic intelligence did not, however, detract in any considerable degree from the interest with which the movements of the pair were watched. At first it was Mr. Preston who afforded the most congenial theme for speculation; but the exceeding quietness of his address and the reserve which characterised his speech soon directed the attention of the neighbours towards his wife. Then a few of them began to contemplate the advisability of making overtures of acquaintance; though with diffidence, for there was something independent, not to say autocratic, about Mrs. Preston, which was apt to overawe a stranger not a little. That she was what is called "original" was evident. A more unconventional person never lived. The next-door neighbours would occasionally be startled out of their lives by a sudden whoop or shout, succeeded by a flow of loud, musical laughter, as at some wonderful practical joke; and then they would hear sounds as of some heavy object

falling with a dull thud upon the floor, succeeded probably by a mighty scurrying to and fro among the servants. By some, these mysterious voices were attributed to perpetual changes in the position of the furniture, Mrs. Preston being credited with a mania for alterations; while others went so far as to express their belief that the extraordinary old lady was actually given to a sort of elephantine romping, and was perpetually bouncing out from behind doors, and indulging in other recreations of an unexpected nature, with a view to making people jump. These alarming rumours deterred many persons from venturing within the house, in spite of their growing curiosity; but one lady declared that she wasn't going to be frightened, and intended to call the very first fine day. Nor did she recede from her resolution. She went and called, and came back with a glowing account of her reception. Mrs. Preston, she vowed, was the very funniest, cheeriest, and most delightful creature she had ever met. She had played no practical jokes upon her visitor, though she looked capable of anything; and she had entered into the friendliest conversation with her, "stomping"—as the adventurous lady expressed it—all over the house, and showing her all her domestic arrangements as pleasantly as could be. "Indeed," concluded the intrepid explorer, "she couldn't have been

friendlier than she was if she'd known me all her life!"

From this time forward, thanks to the pioneering triumph of Miss Ashe—for it was no other than that dauntless person—the neighbourhood became gradually acquainted with the people at No. 7. They proved to be a kindly, generous, though undeniably eccentric pair. Mr. Preston spoke but little; he seemed overborne by the strong current of his wife's impetuosity, and let her have her own way in everything. Such a combination of energy, animal spirits, and *embonpoint* as was presented by Mrs. Preston was but seldom seen. She would chatter, laugh, shout, and flash her fine purple eyes for hours at a stretch; then suddenly inform her visitors that she and her "old man" were early folk, and must be excused for going to bed. Some people were rather offended at being thus unceremoniously told to go, but Mrs. Preston made no distinctions, and there was no use in being angry with her. She soon became the character, *par excellence*, of the neighbourhood, and people were as anxious for her acquaintance as they had been chary in seeking it at first.

There was one subject, however, upon which Mr. and Mrs. Preston never spoke; and that was their family. Nobody knew who they were or to whom they belonged.

This reticence on their part did not spring from a desire to conceal anything, but simply from a personal lack of interest in the subject itself. They cared so little about their connections—for near relations they had none—that it never occurred to them that anybody else could have any curiosity about the matter. And yet there was—yes, I think it may be so characterised—a mystery about the worthy pair; that is, there was something true of them which their neighbours never dreamed of, and which, had it been known, would have increased their importance, and the importance of Walton Terrace, ten thousandfold. I will let my readers into the secret. Mr. Preston was no less a personage than second cousin to a Duke. Of this fact, as I have hinted, nobody thought less than he did himself. He was an advanced Radical in politics, and had but little sympathy with the patrician class. He had never seen his august relative in his life, and had no curiosity to see him; while it may be strongly doubted whether the Duke, on his part, had ever so much as heard of Mr. Preston. Between them stretched a long chain of uncles, nephews, and first cousins, who were most of them just cognisant of Mr. Preston's existence; but there had been no communication between them and the prosperous stockbroker for certainly fifteen years.

Such being the case, it need not be a matter of surprise that several members of the ducal house had passed away without the knowledge of Mr. Preston. He might have noticed a few of their deaths, perhaps, in the *Times;* but such events made but little impression on his mind, which was too closely occupied with the machinations of bulls and bears to pay much attention to other matters. And so things went on, until there was no life between Mr. Preston and the Dukedom of Moneysworth but that of the reigning Duke; who, on learning this alarming fact from his solicitors, began to make hasty preparations for marriage. That the title and estates of his family should pass into the hands of an obscure stockbroker who lived at Camden Town was too terrible a possibility to contemplate, and must be prevented at any sacrifice. Negotiations were accordingly set on foot for a suitable alliance, the family solicitors, to whom the Duke referred the matter (being one on which he felt quite indifferent himself), having suggested the only daughter of the Duke of Grandchester as the most eligible *partie* in the market. That the Lady Gwendolen was three years older than his Grace was of no account; that beneath the family smoothness of exterior there lurked elements of prickliness and acidity, unlikely to be modified with age, was a consideration easily counterbalanced by the

lady's advantages of rank and wealth. In the course of a few weeks the engagement of the noble pair was duly announced in the Society journals, and preparations for the marriage were hurried on. But alas! though man proposes and woman generally accepts, the disposition of the lot is in hands not always taken into account. Three weeks before the wedding-day there was a great steeplechase, in which the Duke of Moneysworth took part. The country was hard riding, and slippery from recent rains; several croppers varied the proceedings, all more or less severe, and among the fallen was the hapless Duke. At first his accident was not observed; but in time he was discovered lying helpless in a ditch with his back broken in three places. It was a terrible tumble, and of that sort which, curiously enough, so seldom occurs to any but first-rate riders. The unfortunate young man was carried home speechless, and died in a few hours.

"Any letters this morn'n', middair?" asked Mrs. Preston, two days after the tragic occurrence, as she descended heavily into the breakfast-room at Walton Terrace. "Lor! why, I never heard the postman. I say, middair, don't you think it would be wise—Hannah! Hannah! Bless

the girl!—You can bring in the coffee-pot, Hannah—'twould be wise to shut that window, middair?"

Mr. Preston was stalking slowly and angularly up and down the room, his head thrust forward, his face a mass of perplexed puckers, and an open letter crushed in his right hand. He turned somewhat vacantly towards his wife as she entered, and then mechanically shut the window.

"Come, middair, here's your coffee," pursued Mrs. Preston, putting her husband's cup in its accustomed place. But Mr. Preston neither heard nor answered. "Why, what's the matter with you this morn'n', my old man?" exclaimed his larger half, turning partly round and looking attentively at his preoccupied face. "You don't seem yourself at all."

"H'm," began Mr. Preston, with evident effort. "Here's a letter"——he said, slowly and with deliberation.

"Why, what's it about?" interrupted his wife, opening her eyes and ears. "No bad news, I hope, middair?"

Mr. Preston's face assumed an expression of acute suffering, which had an almost ludicrous effect, as he sat down sideways on a chair and beat the air impatiently with one hand. "Here's a letter," he repeated, more deliberately and circumstantially than before, "from Messrs.

Dangerfield & Walters, announcing an accident which has just befallen the Duke of Moneysworth in a steeplechase. They say he was thrown from his horse, and has since died of the injuries he sustained."

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Mrs. Preston, whose expressions were apt to be a little profane when put off her guard by any sudden shock.

Mr. Preston sat, silent and absorbed, gazing absently out of the window.

"Why, middair," continued Mrs. Preston, "he was just going to be married, wasn't he? What'll Lady Gwendolen do now, do you suppose?"

"Do without him, I should think," said Mr. Preston, very drily. "Yes; it's a sad affair—a very sad affair. Poor fellow! But that's what I've always said. Young men go in for these violent exercises, risk their necks and all their limbs, and then are quite astonished if they get killed. It's a shocking business altogether."

"I'm sure it ought to be a warn'n' to us all," said Mrs. Preston, shaking her fat chin, while her excited eyes glittered with tears. "Pore young man! But what do Dangerfield & Walters say besides? Who is the new Duke?"

Mr. Preston let his right hand fall gently on his knee,

and turned a fixed, quiet look upon his wife's face without speaking.

"Who is it, middair?" asked Mrs. Preston again.

"Who do you think?" said Mr. Preston, quietly.

"Why, I don't know at all," replied the old lady, thoughtfully. "It would have been Lord Edward Bagshott, if he'd lived; but there! I feel quite upset. Tell me who it is, my old king."

"Think," said Mr. Preston.

"What do you mean, middair?" exclaimed Mrs. Preston, struck now for the first time by the expression on her husband's face. "You don't mean to tell me——"

"Yes, I do," replied Mr. Preston; "at least, I suppose you suspect the truth. We've known of the possibility of this for some time, you know; in fact, ever since Lord Edward died. But we never thought anything about it. And now it's come to pass."

"And you're the new Duke!" gasped Mrs. Preston, breathlessly.

"There's the letter," replied her husband, laconically, pushing it across the table. Mrs. Preston burst into a flood of tears.

"Well, well, well," said Mr. Preston, soothingly. He had taken the news quietly enough himself, but he really

felt almost as agitated as his wife. "Come, come, my dear," he said, laying the tips of his thin cool fingers on her plump hand. Then he made a feint of taking his coffee, and broke a bit of toast over it, while his wife dried her eyes and made an effort to regain her equanimity. It took a good deal generally to upset Mrs. Preston, for she was of an energetic and masterful nature notwithstanding her unwieldy frame; but the suddenness of the shock on this occasion was, for a few minutes, too much for her. At last she said—

"And what are you going to do now, middair?"

"Go to the City, I suppose," replied her husband, as though rather surprised at the question.

"But you won't keep on going to the City always," rejoined Mrs. Preston. "Lor, you pore old darl'n', the very idea of you being a Duke! But tell me, now, middair; you'll go to the funeral, I suppose?"

"I shall have to," replied Mr. Preston. "Yes; I shall have to do that, of course. And then my affairs in the City will have to be wound up." He spoke deliberately, as usual, but with a sort of reluctant conviction in his tone, which seemed to imply that the impending changes would not be altogether unattended with pain. "But meantime, let no reference be made to this outside."

"Why, no; of course not," assented Mrs. Preston. "Lor, what'll Miss Ashe say, I wonder? Middair," she continued, as she felt her appetite coming back, "just give me a bit of ham about the size of a shilling, will you? One must eat, I suppose, whatever happens."

Mr. Preston apparently knew quite well the size assumed by shillings in the imagination of his spouse when they served as a standard for helpings of ham, for he immediately cut a slice which covered about two thirds of that lady's plate. Then he remarked—

"We shall have to go down to Fennshire soon, you know."

"What for?" inquired his wife.

"To take possession of The Towers," said Mr. Preston.

"Now look you here, middair," declared Mrs. Preston, impressively; "I've a strong feeling that I shall never bear to live in The Towers at all. It's a gloomy, wretched place, surrounded by bogs, where it always pours with rain; and besides, I don't think I could ever live where that pore fellow has been killed."

"Why, you don't want to live in Walton Terrace all your life, do you?" asked Mr. Preston, raising his eyebrows.

"No, middair, I don't," was the reply; "but I think we might find a rather more cheerful place than Humdrum

Towers. Why, it's so damp it would kill us both with rheumatism and ague; and then those unwholesome swamps and ditches, and the smell of wet ground, and the flat, dismal country—oh no, middair, it would never do for either of us, depend upon it. I should die of dulness in a year."

"Where do you want to go, then?" asked Mr. Preston.

"Plenty of time to think of that, middair," answered his wife, as she washed the egg-spoons in the slopbasin, preparatory to the more elaborate process of purification in store for them downstairs. "What time shall you be home to-night?"

"About the same time as usual, I suppose," returned Mr. Preston, rising from his chair. "Now mind; not a word to any soul upon the subject. We'll see what arrangements are to be made in a day or two. And now I must be off."

Humdrum Towers, the seat of the Dukes of Moneysworth, certainly deserved the character for dampness and gloom attributed to it by Mrs. Preston. It stood in the dampest and lowest part of Fennshire, and was surrounded by vast and dreary grounds, where the grass grew rank and thick and the trees rotted slowly with the wet. In one glade of the doleful park stood a large pool of stagnant

water, which was generally known as the Black Tarn. It was said to be of fathomless depth, and had acquired an evil reputation from the fact that a former Duke, having lost some fabulous amount at *écarté* one night, had gone wandering wildly out of the house in the direction of the Tarn, and had never been heard of since. Nor was the interior of the mansion less eerie than its surroundings. Strange sounds were wont to be heard in the walls, ascribed by the superstitious to bricked-up ghosts, and by the more practical to falling lumps of mortar, loosened by old age; the hollow wainscotings were peopled thickly with fierce rats, and the sides of nearly all the rooms were slimy with soaked-in moisture. Altogether The Towers was a place where it seemed to be November all the year round. It had been a fine place in its day—for it dated from the reign of Richard the Third; but long years of neglect and damp had caused the work of decay to set in with rapidity, and it was now only fit for the habitation of bats and owls. There is no doubt that Mrs. Preston, or the new Duchess, as we must now call her, was fully justified in her determination never to sleep a night within its walls.

As soon, then, as the first bustle and wonder of the affair were over, the Duke and Duchess of Moneysworth, having made arrangements for the sale of Humdrum

Towers, set to work to find a more cheerful residence. For some time they were unsuccessful; at last, however, it transpired that there was a place in the West of England that, from all accounts, bade fair to answer their requirements. It was described as "a palatial villa residence, with superb conservatories, standing in ornamental grounds which sloped down to the river Isbourne, two miles from the town of Heathercombe. The land attached to this truly magnificent abode," proceeded the house-agent's catalogue, "consists of two hundred and seventy acres, a large portion being laid out in the most approved style of landscape-gardening. Drawing-rooms, 50 feet by 35; dining-room, 40 feet by 20. Reception-rooms, library, twelve bedrooms, stabling, and the usual offices. Also a decorated belvidere, commanding an exquisite view of the adjacent country. Suitable for a gentleman's or nobleman's family. Rent £—— per annum, on a lease of not less than twenty-one years."

And the place proved all that the description promised. It was a really splendid villa, replete with every imaginable comfort, and surrounded by gardens most beautifully laid out and in unexceptionable order. Now a well-kept garden was one of the new Duchess's pet weaknesses, and she fell in love with it at once. The lawns were as smooth

as the finest velvet; the flower-beds blazed with the rarest and most brilliant hues; the shrubberies were—as her Grace remarked—"a sight to behold," and the view from the belvidere was glorious. The house itself fronted a beautiful grass-plat which dipped gently down to the very edge of the stream; while on the other side of the villa, far out of sight, there were about ten acres of ground which had been left in their natural condition as a lovely bit of wilderness or forest glade, that suddenly opened through a miniature gorge of rocks and liliputian precipices upon a sheet of clear water known as Laburnum Lake, from the wealth of the golden clusters that fringed its borders. True, it was not the place exactly for a great Duke, beautiful as it was; and by the side of Castle Sudds, the seat of the Grandchester family, it dwindled into insignificance. But our Duke and Duchess cared no more for appearances and conventionalities than when they were plain Mr. and Mrs. Preston living at Camden Town; and as the place pleased them, they took it, and never troubled their heads about what other people thought. The Duke, it is true, asked his wife with some dry humour whether it would be quite proper to poach, so to speak, on the Duke of Grandchester's preserves; but the Duchess had only replied, with a contemptuous sniff, that so long as that nobleman

didn't hang out his washing too near to her palings, she had no intention of taking any notice of him, and then pounded off to inspect the vineries without bestowing another thought upon the matter. In due time the preliminaries were all completed, and the Duke and Duchess of Moneysworth came quietly down one day in an open carriage and took possession of their new abode, upon which they conferred the unpretending but appropriate title of The Hyacinths.

CHAPTER V.

FURTHER EXPERIENCES.

Giraldi did not fail to keep his appointment with Tresham on the Monday following the reception at Lady Sharp's. A light bounding step and a peremptory little rap at the door of Tresham's room announced his advent, and he came in with a bright smile on his face which contrasted remarkably with the absent look he had worn on their first meeting. Tresham received him with equal cordiality, and finding him disposed to talk with freedom, contented himself with putting in a word every now and then to give the conversation such turns as he was desirous it should take. Giraldi chatted away gaily enough on art, evincing no small amount of taste and culture; his remarks, too, on the people they had met the previous Thursday evening were often shrewd and lively.

Luncheon over, they started on their country-walk, intending, on their way home, to pay two or three visits in the town. This addition to their programme was made at

the suggestion of Tresham, upon whom several cards had been already left. For a long time they rambled along through some of the most beautiful woodland scenery in Westlandshire, passing many of the well-stocked market-gardens and fine orchards for which that county enjoys so just a fame; then, turning northward, they made a detour round the foot of the heather-covered hills, down which rolled splashing a rivulet of the clearest water. Giraldi, with true artist eye, continually recognised and pointed out to his companion picturesque bits and combinations which a less trained faculty would have overlooked; and Tresham was delighted with the accurate and rapid manner in which he caught the salient features of anything that struck him, and jotted them down in his pocket sketch-book for future use.

"There! I think that must do for to-day," said Giraldi, throwing himself down on the sloping turf, and gazing dreamily over the landscape. "Oh, isn't everything charming? I often wonder whatever possessed people to build towns, when the country is so infinitely nicer."

"There are many things in the world that are necessary in exact proportion to their unpleasantness," said Tresham.

"Does that include persons too?" asked Giraldi, merrily.

"Why not?" laughed Tresham. "If only for the sake

of making us appreciate agreeable ones all the more. Besides, unusually disagreeable people have a certain attraction for me, peculiar to themselves. I look upon them as phenomena, and they interest me accordingly. Did it never strike you that some persons may be said to be fascinatingly ugly, for instance?"

"Yes, that's quite true," returned Giraldi. "I always like drawing ugly people better than pretty ones; they lend themselves so much more easily to caricature."

"Then I hope you'll never take it into your head to draw me," retorted Tresham. "After all, to return to what we were saying, there's nothing like inanimate nature. What companionship, in the long-run, is as inspiring as such a view as we are looking on just now?"

"Do you know——I hope you won't be angry with me," said Giraldi, breaking off abruptly, "but I don't think that you, as a Protestant, can enjoy nature half as much as we Catholics do."

"Why not?" exclaimed Tresham, surprised.

"Because, you see, *we* look at it from a sacramental point of view," returned Giraldi. "Father Aloysius calls the universe the Eighth Sacrament, because, he says, it is the outward and visible manifestation of the underlying nature of God; and it is really upon the same idea that

the sacraments of the Church are based. But you Protestants don't believe in any sacraments; so you really see only half the beauty of the world, and that the less important part."

"Who ever told you that Protestants don't believe in sacraments?" said Tresham. "Allow me to assure you that you are most tremendously mistaken on that point. Your view of the universe is both poetical and, I think, true, and I therefore demur altogether to your appropriating it as the special property of Roman Catholics. It must commend itself to every thoughtful man who is not an actual atheist."

"Really?" said Giraldi, with a look of genuine surprise.

"Really," answered Tresham, smiling. "You will understand these matters better some day, I have no doubt. But come; it is getting on for four o'clock, and if we are going to pay these visits of ours, we had better be on the move."

"Where do you want to go first?" asked Giraldi, as they descended the grassy slope.

"To Lady Sharp's," replied Tresham. "I ought to have been there before. She's been expecting me, I fancy."

"What has she got to do with you?" inquired Giraldi,

with a puzzled look. "Does your chapel belong to her, or what?"

"Yes; it is what is called a 'Proprietary' chapel," explained the other, "and she is the owner of it. She asked your uncle Sir Jupiter to look out for an incumbent, and he offered it to me. That is all the connection that exists between us."

"And will she go there to hear you preach?" pursued Giraldi.

"I hope not," answered Tresham, hastily; then, correcting himself, he added, "I don't mean that. But she belongs to a sect of her own, you know. Her minister is Mr. Leech."

"But if you have so many sects, how can you know which is right?" said Giraldi, artlessly.

"No reasonable person imagines for a moment that any one sect, or any one man, is a depository of the whole truth and nothing but the truth," replied Tresham. "All the bigotry and religious persecution that exists takes its rise from that ignorant and arrogant supposition, with regard to themselves, on the part of narrow-minded people. Diversity of opinion there must be as long as each man has an identity separate from his neighbour; it's a simple necessity of human nature as at present constituted."

"Of course—as long as you have no authoritative guide," rejoined Giraldi. "But where you have, as in our case, there is neither the need nor the possibility for any differences."

"What such guide have you in the Church of Rome?" asked Tresham.

"Why, the Pope, of course; who, as mouthpiece of the Church's councils, is infallible," replied Giraldi.

"But if all the Popes are infallible," urged Tresham, "how is it that one has so often repudiated the bulls of his predecessor, and condemned the dogmas he promulgated as heretical?"

"Such a thing never occurred," said Giraldi, rather sullenly. "It's a Protestant fabrication."

"Is it not clear to you, on the contrary, that our only means of knowing it has been through Catholic historians?" replied Tresham. "Read Baronius, and see what he says; and remember, while you are reading him, that he was not only a devout Catholic, but a professed apologist for the Papacy. However," he continued, in a lighter tone, "don't think I blame the Popes for doing it. If I were a Pope, I am sure I should begin my pontificate by striking out a new line for myself, whatever discredit I might throw upon those who had gone before me."

"You are very fluent," observed Giraldi; "but I know

there *must be* an answer to this and all other Protestant arguments. Tell me one thing more, and then we will drop the subject. If you don't believe in any audible or visible standard of truth, what is a man to be judged by? What is the test of his religion?"

"In one word, Sincerity," was the emphatic reply. "Let a man believe and act sincerely, and no one else dare judge him. We may differ from him—he may be wrong or he may be right—but so long as he holds an honest and sincere belief, and acts up to it as far as in him lies, I deny the right of anybody to call his religion in question. I will even go further still, and say that I hold reverent doubt to be an infinitely nobler thing than slipshod and unintelligent credulity."

To this Giraldi made no reply; and in a few minutes they found themselves walking up the carriage-drive that led to Lady Sharp's front door. The house looked gloomy and uncared-for. The paint was peeling off the woodwork; the curtains, just visible within the windows, were old and faded, and the broad gravel paths were sadly disfigured by weeds. Cheerful enough by night, when full of people, the rooms looked dowdy and dull by day, and exercised a depressing influence upon the visitors, which was not removed by the manners of the hostess herself.

Tresham had to ring three times before the door was answered—always a dispiriting commencement to a call; and when at last they were admitted, they were compelled to wait at least ten minutes in the gloomy drawing-room before her ladyship appeared.

"How do you do, Mr. Tresham?" said Lady Sharp, as she came tramping heavily into the apartment. "I must apologise for keeping you so long. Pray be seated," she continued, graciously, including Giraldi in an outward sweep of her hand. "You must be tired, for I see you came on foot."

This was said with a side-glance at their boots, which were certainly a trifle dusty. But Tresham only said—

"Yes; I have been making acquaintance with some of the beauties of your neighbourhood, which quite come up to all I had heard about them."

"I'm told there are some pretty walks about," returned the lady; "but I seldom venture out. I leave hedging and ditching for those who have younger legs than I have. My gallivanting days are over."

The implied scorn for those who still gallivanted, hedged, and ditched, perceptible in his hostess's tone as she said this, rather disconcerted Tresham. Giraldi laughed naïvely, as though Lady Sharp had uttered something intentionally

funny; whereupon she turned her shoulder ever so little away from where he was sitting, and addressed herself again to his companion.

"Of course you have visited your church?"

"I officiated in it yesterday evening," was the reply.

"Indeed?" exclaimed his patroness, in a coldly-astonished tone. "I should have thought that one of Mr. Fairweather's curates could have taken the services for one more Sunday without inconvenience. You've lost no time, at any rate. I was not aware you intended to begin so soon, otherwise I might have managed to be present."

Tresham, who had been quite innocent of any design to steal a march on Lady Sharp, replied simply that he was sorry for the misunderstanding, and hoped to have the pleasure of seeing her occasionally among his hearers in the future.

"Oh, I have no doubt I shall look in now and then—to some of the evening services, perhaps," answered Lady Sharp, loftily; "but for my own part, I do not derive much profit from sitting under very young preachers. I always feel that I can tell them so much more than they can tell me," she added, with an uneasy smile that was intended to be very frank.

Tresham bowed gravely.

"Of course, it is one of the disadvantages of all young clergymen that their own duties prevent them from attending the ministrations of their older brethren," continued Lady Sharp. "It is a grievous pity you gave yourself no opportunity of doing so yesterday; we had a most refreshing exercise at the Little Hill, under Mr. Leech. I never found his word more acceptable. He is full of unction, as even you must have perceived the other night."

"Is he an eloquent preacher?" asked Tresham, by way of offering a perfectly safe remark.

"His is the eloquence of Truth," said Lady Sharp, severely. "I seldom go to any other means of grace; I am not a wanderer. Except, indeed, once in a way to Bethabara. But I am afraid the style of the Bethabara preaching would scarcely commend itself to you. It is in every sense strong meat—not milk for babes and learners."

Giraldi's round eyes opened so wide at this remark that Tresham had much ado to preserve a decorous gravity. A somewhat awkward silence fell upon the party, during which Lady Sharp gazed abstractedly before her, biting her lips and nodding her head in her own peculiar way. At length she turned again to Tresham, and said, with a conventional smile—

"And what do you think of your future fellow-residents, whom you met here on Thursday?"

"They made a very agreeable impression upon me," answered Tresham, relieved at the change of subject. "There seem to be some remarkably pleasant people among them. Dr. Urquhart struck me as being an exceptionally cultivated man; Miss Heath, too, I liked—and one or two others, whose names have escaped me. On the whole, I was much pleased."

"Dr. Urquhart is clever enough, no doubt," was the rejoinder; "but scarcely a desirable Mentor for a minister of the Gospel. Miss Heath has good natural abilities, but she has been very much neglected. Her only guardian is an invalid widowed aunt, who has no influence over her whatever. A very self-willed young woman, I have always thought; shows great lack of proper training, with very unsettled views of life."

Again Tresham found himself shut up; and, despairing of any more satisfactory conversation, rose to take his leave.

"Good-bye, Mr. Tresham," said her ladyship, holding out her hand with a smile of some relief. "I hope you will not be long in finding a wide sphere of usefulness, and never have any reason to regret having cast your lot among us."

Giraldi, to whom she had not addressed a word beyond the barest civilities of greeting, also prepared to go; the bell was rung for the servant, and in a couple of minutes they were both outside the house.

"Well, that's over!" exclaimed Tresham, drawing a long breath of relief. "She certainly is not a very cordial person. And why in all the world did she never speak to you? Have you offended her in any way?"

"Not that I'm aware of," returned Giraldi, with a slight laugh; "except, of course, that I'm a benighted Papist."

"I don't think she can be a very happy woman," observed Tresham, musingly. "Did you notice how haggard her eyes looked? She gives me the impression of a person suffering from secret anxiety or corroding care. There must be something at the bottom of her unamiable behaviour."

"Perhaps," rejoined Giraldi. "She wants some excuse, I'm sure. I don't think I ever heard her say a kind thing of anybody, except perhaps of some one belonging to her own religion. And now, where are we to go?"

"Why, now I have to call upon the Rector," replied Tresham. "Do you know him?"

"No," said Giraldi. "I know *of* him, though; he calls

Father Aloysius a hydra. I think I won't go in; I'll wait outside for you."

"All right; do so," assented the other. "I probably shan't be long."

Ten minutes more along a pretty winding road brought them in view of the Rectory, a large, old-fashioned house with stone facings, gables, and mullioned windows. It might have been named the Rookery quite as appropriately as the Rectory, for the house was encompassed by a number of grand old elms full of rooks' nests, and the air resounded with the pleasant cawing of the birds as they flew and wheeled in measured circles among their leafy roosts. Giraldi perched himself on a stile which faced the Rectory gates, and relapsed into his usual dreamy abstraction, leaving Tresham to make his way to the front door and pay his respects to his ecclesiastical superior.

The bell pealed sonorously through the old house as Tresham tugged at the stiff handle, and in a few seconds a ponderous old butler appeared to answer the summons. Tresham was ushered into an uninhabited-looking drawing-room while his card was taken up—a big, richly-furnished apartment, but lacking all those signs of life and use without which the finest rooms look comfortless. In a short time the ponderous butler re-entered, and announced

that Mr. Fairweather would be happy to see him in his study. Tresham accordingly followed the man upstairs, and the next moment found himself in the presence of the Rector, who rose with some exertion to receive him. He was a tallish, fat, elderly man, with a very large, soft, sequacious stomach, over which his waistcoat sat in many folds; a clear, roseate complexion, expansive cheeks, and a blue and lazy eye.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Tresham," said the Rector, in a soft, thick voice. "Pray be seated; no, not there—that low arm-chair will be more comfortable. Roberts! the brown sherry. You will find these Trabucos fairly smokeable, I think, Mr. Tresham; let me prevail on you to try one."

The Trabuco proved exquisite; the sherry was superb. Nothing less than the best suited the luxurious habits of the Rector of Heathercombe, who, as long as he could make his earthly pilgrimage in a Pullman's car, never troubled himself with any misgivings as to the terminus towards which he was being whirled. He was wont to read the parable of Dives with much complacency; for, thanks to the excellent administration of the parochial poors'-rates, he had no inconvenient Lazarus lying at his garden gate, vainly desirous of his superfluities, and

deranging his appetite by the exhibition of reproachful sores. There was no greater proof, in the Rector's view, of the Divine origin of Christianity than that its influence in establishing charitable organisations and public relief funds should actually have disarmed that very uncomfortable parable of all possible application to respectable persons in the present day, and have rendered Lazarus a perverse anachronism, who had nobody but himself to thank if he died of hunger in the streets.

"And so you have come to take charge of the district church?" observed the Rev. Chauncey Fairweather, as he settled himself comfortably in his large arm-chair, and slowly puffed out a fragrant cloud of smoke. "Well, I'm glad of it—I'm glad of it. I'm getting almost past work, and we want younger men—younger men, Sir. The parish is growing fast, they tell me, and the Dissenters are increasing. What we want is new blood in the Church, Sir—new blood, new blood."

"I don't think the Church can be reproached with inactivity just now," said Tresham; "there seems energy enough in all directions. Of course I am speaking generally; I have no experience of Heathercombe at present."

"Oh, the Church is active enough, I dare say," replied the Rector; "indeed, I don't pretend to keep pace with it.

The Church was not so active in my young days, and we did well enough then. I'm too old to change now, and the times move too fast for me altogether. It's for you younger men to buckle on your spurs now. My day is over."

"Are the Dissenters very powerful in Heathercombe?" asked Tresham.

"So they tell me," said the Rector, in his rich, husky voice. "It's a very remarkable sign of the times, to my thinking, and you rising generation will do well to take heed to it. The multitude, Sir, are like a restive horse, which must be held in with bit and bridle; once give 'em their head, and there's no knowing where they'll plunge to. Liberty, liberty—that's the cry of the day. And the result, of course, is license; which means Radicalism in politics and dissent and infidelity in religion. I don't know what things are coming to, and I'm sure I tremble for the future," said Mr. Fairweather, sipping his brown sherry with the gusto of a connoisseur.

"Don't you think that affairs might have been different had the Church pursued a different policy?" suggested the younger clergyman. "Has she never alienated where she might have conciliated, and rejected aids which have subsequently been turned against her?"

"The dignity and position of the Church of England alike preclude her from stooping to conciliation," rejoined the Rector, somewhat pompously. "Her error has lain in her too vacillating measures, and the evil appears now past cure. Tolerance is as the letting out of water, which must eventually burst the sluices. And we're attacked on two sides now, if all they tell me is true. There's a nest of those Roman Catholic hydras, Sir, in this very town, who are doing their very utmost to undermine the Church of England as by law established, by spreading their pernicious heresies all over the county of Westlandshire. Why, Sir, if those men had their way, Great Britain would become a Roman province in a year. They build orphanages, they set up schools, they grub about among the poor, they distribute soup, and flannel, and I don't know what all, and, in short, are moving heaven and earth to make proselytes. They're deep rogues, Sir, deep rogues; you've your work cut out for you if you want to make way against 'em."

"But surely the poor are not neglected by our own clergy?" said Tresham. "If they are properly looked after by us, I shouldn't think it would be so easy for the Catholics to cut the ground from under our feet."

"Faith, Sir, they've got the parochial authorities to

apply to, haven't they?" retorted the Rector, a little warmly. "It is not meet that *we* should leave the Word of God to serve tables. It's enough for us to pay poors'-rates, I think, and leave the distribution of relief to the proper officers. I object strongly to indiscriminate charity, especially when it's made an instrument of perversion among the ignorant by a pack of seditious and designing rogues. I'd put 'em in the stocks, Sir, every mother's son of 'em, if I had my way in the matter."

"And what sort of people are the Dissenters?" asked Tresham, feeling that he had put it a little awkwardly, but desirous of diverting the conversation into other channels.

"I know none of 'em personally," answered the Rector; "I never spoke to one of 'em in my life. *Longè mea discrepat istis et vox et ratio*, as Horace says—if such an application is permissible. But I'll tell you what, Sir; you'll have to get married—that's what you'll have to do. Nothing like a wife for a young clergyman. I shouldn't wonder, now, if it mightn't have made a better man of *me*, if I'd married when I entered the Church."

"Marry!" exclaimed Tresham, rather aghast.

"Ay, marry," retorted the old clergyman, decidedly. "There's nothing very strange in that, is there?"

"Not in the abstract, I suppose," hesitated the other, smiling; "only the idea is quite new to me as regards myself. I have never contemplated marriage—at least, since I was ordained."

"Not a *Ritualist!*" almost gasped the Rector, holding up both hands in horrified amaze. "You don't mean to say you believe in a celibate clergy, do you?"

"Oh, dear no," answered Tresham, with a candid laugh. "All I meant was that I have no present wish to change my state. I'm happy enough as I am; and hitherto have certainly never met——"

"Is that all?" said the Rector, much relieved. "Oh, well, that may soon be set right. You've been here long enough to have seen some of our young ladies at any rate, and there's no knowing—there's no knowing, you know," repeated Mr. Fairweather, nodding sagely. "You're not a misogynist, are you?—eh?"

"By no means," replied Tresham, smiling; "I am simply indifferent to women. And from all I've heard and seen, I hope I shall remain so. I fully agree with what Keats said on this subject. A man in love is, to onlookers, rather a pitiable spectacle; he is often unfitted for the duties of common life, and lives in a region of enervating dreams and delusive moonshine. He sees everything through a distorting medium; in fact, he's no longer

in possession of a sane mind. I may not be overburdened with either ability or sense, but such as I have I intend, if possible, to keep in their natural condition."

"Heaven be gracious to us!" ejaculated the Rector, letting his hands drop, and gazing helplessly at Tresham. "Young man, young man! Do you know what you're saying? It's folly, Sir—folly. Why, bless my heart, Sir, it's not natural. Dreams! Moonshine! Why, Sir, it's heresy—heresy against human nature. Where did you ever pick up such ideas as these?"

"From observation and experience," said Tresham. "And I hold to it that they are well founded."

"Tut, tut, Sir!" was the testy response. "Why, what would become of the human race if everybody thought as you do?"

"I don't wish or expect everybody to think as I do," answered the young man. "I am quite content that other people should marry and be given in marriage, fall in and out of love, and carry out the decrees of Providence by so doing; it's as much a necessity for one line of purposes as wars and pestilence are for another. That I quite admit. I only beg to be excused from participating; and I fully intend to hold myself aloof as long as possible."

"Well, well!" breathed the Rector. "What views, what views! I hope and trust you're not equally unsound upon

Church matters. But come; let me fill your glass. The stuff's as mild as milk. You find it to your liking, don't you?"

Tresham paid a deserved compliment to the choiceness of the wine, but said it was time for him to go. The Rector seemed to regret the shortness of his visit, and pressed him, with some lazy warmth, to look him up again. Tresham acknowledged the courtesy, but was careful not to commit himself to any promise; for, to do him justice, he was naturally a hard-working, active man, and nothing was further from his intention than to degenerate into a mere society parson or clerical diner-out. Besides which, he was not very pleasantly impressed by the Rev. Chauncey Fairweather, whose mental and physical torpor acted irritatingly upon his nerves, and whose easy-going selfishness rather disgusted him. And then what right had the Rector to lecture him about getting married? In a younger man it would have been an impertinence; and even in the case of an old man the bounds of privilege were easily overstepped. No, thought Tresham to himself, as he sauntered down the shelving staircase, it would not answer his purpose to have much to do with Mr. Fairweather, who was altogether too heavy and philistine in his notions for the fellowship of so independent a thinker as himself.

By the time he arrived at the iron gates, however, his meditations were interrupted by a strange and startling sight. Drawn up on the opposite side of the road was a very large, plain, open carriage; and in this carriage sat the towering form of an enormous lady, with a big, brown face full of animation, bright violet eyes, a close pink bonnet, and a rich cloak. By her side was discernible a shrunken-looking elderly gentleman with a deeply corrugated face, and a rather seedy, broad-brimmed hat set firmly towards the back of his head; while at the carriage door stood Giraldi, in the act, apparently, of concluding a conversation with the old lady. The coachman was just gathering up the reins to start when the lady, turning her head, caught a glimpse of Tresham; upon which she gave a sudden twirl or jerk to the sunshade she was carrying, and, to his utter bewilderment, cried out, in a jovial, friendly voice—

"Why now, here *is* Mr. Tresham, after all! How do you do, Mr. Tresham? You see I know *you*, though you never saw *me* before. Now I haven't got any time to stay and speak to you just now, but I shall be glad if you'll come and pay us a visit up at the house some day soon, because I want to send you a card for my garden-party next month. There, now! Well, good-bye, good-bye!" and the carriage rolled away, leaving Tresham standing,

hat in hand, gazing blankly after it, as the pink bonnet went bobbing up and down and dwindled into a mere speck in the distance. Giraldi reeled with laughter.

"Who in the world is that?" demanded Tresham, when his astonishment permitted him to speak.

"I shall die with laughing if you go on looking so," gasped Giraldi, between his paroxysms of mirth. "Oh, if I could only draw you at this moment! Isn't she a funny, enchanting old thing? I'm so glad you came out when you did."

"But who is she?" repeated Tresham, "and who is the crumpled-up old gentleman that was packed away on the other side?"

"Oh, he's an awfully dear old fellow," replied Giraldi; "you'll like him immensely when you come to know him, I'm sure. But aren't they a funny couple? I've got such a splendid sketch of them at home."

"In caricature, no doubt. But you haven't told me about that astonishing old lady yet. Who is she?"

"The Queen of Heathercombe!"

"Alias—in common life?"

"Her Grace the Duchess of Moneysworth," replied Giraldi.

CHAPTER VI.

NAOMI.

The advent of the Duke and Duchess of Moneysworth, as might be supposed, caused no small stir in the little world of Heathercombe. Hitherto the acknowledged sovereign had been no more than the vaguest entity—a *roi fainéant*, august, but invisible. Now, however, there had come a potentate equally august and infinitely more tangible. The new tenants of The Hyacinths showed every disposition to make friends among their neighbours, without in any way laying themselves out to court popularity for its own sake; the consequence being that their popularity was speedily at its height. The Duke of Grandchester was forgotten; even Lord Pulvilio was nowhere.

"Preston? Preston?" mused the supplanted Duke, as he read in the morning papers the name of the new representative of the Moneysworth family. "Pulvilio," he continued, dropping his gold eye-glasses and slightly turning to his son, "there never *was* a Preston, was there?"

"I never heard of one," replied his lordship, listlessly.

"I suppose the man's name is of no consequence to anybody but himself."

"Certainly not," assented the Duke, with suave indifference. But his Grace's interest was roused to greater purpose a few weeks afterwards, when he read in the *Westhampton Weathercock* an announcement that the Duke and Duchess of Moneysworth had "purchased the lease of a palatial villa near the town of Heathercombe, not far from Castle Sudds—a seat, by the way, but rarely honoured by the presence of its princely owner. We understand," continued the paragraph, "that the Duke of Moneysworth has no intention of adding his name to the list of absentee-residents, but is desirous of identifying his interests as largely as possible with those of the neighbourhood in which he is about to live."

Were Her Majesty the Queen to read in one of the London papers an intimation that the King of Otaheite was shortly expected to take up his residence not far from Buckingham Palace with a view to consoling the inhabitants of London for her prolonged absences in the Scottish Highlands, she could scarcely be more astounded than was his Grace of Grandchester on perusing the above article. Incredulity, amusement, and wounded pride succeeded each other rapidly in his mind. That another Duke should have the audacity to thrust himself into a

sphere already hallowed by his patronage and influence was terrible enough; but that the interloper should be a *parvenu*, a common City man, who owed his title to an unfortunate concatenation of mistimed deaths, to take advantage of which seemed almost like a breach of delicacy, added a fresh sting to the affront. For some time, however, the Duke did nothing. Then he sent Lord Pulvilio down to Heathercombe to report upon the condition of affairs. This was about six months after the arrival of the intruders, when they had already established their popularity. The Marquis informed his Grace on his return that the "Preston people" were a pair of eccentric guys, and that the county seemed to have gone mad after them. The man, he added, was a Radical, as might have been expected, and was likely to exercise an injurious influence upon the borough politically. They were both of them hand-in-glove with nearly all classes of the community; they entertained freely, and appeared to choose their friends without any regard to rank or party. Clearly, if the Grandchester prerogative was to be maintained at all, there was no time to be lost, and his lordship actually went so far as to suggest the advisability of a sojourn at Castle Sudds. This, however, the Duke could not bring himself to agree to. It was disgusting enough to find himself ousted from power by an upstart stockbroker from

the City; but to enter the field in person, and place himself in actual competition with his rival, would have involved far too serious a compromise of his prestige. It was only when a year had elapsed since the reconnoitring visit of Lord Pulvilio that the Duke was compelled to give in, and see what his own presence could do in the recalcitrant little borough. Then, having once made up his mind, he lost no time in putting his determination into practice.

A fairer day never dawned than that selected by the Duchess of Moneysworth for one of her garden-parties. It was late in June; the sun shone brilliantly in a sky of divinest blue, over which scudded the whitest and fleeciest of cloudlets; the lawns had been newly mown, and the garden blazed with every variety of gorgeous flower. The Duchess was in her element. She trotted about superintending all the arrangements herself, plodding valorously here and there, as fast as her bulk would permit; now swooping into the kitchens to see that the turkeys, pies, and other cold comestibles were in due readiness, and now emerging unexpectedly in the midst of the gardeners, who were busy cutting flowers, arranging seats, sweeping the paths, and rolling the velvet lawns. The Duke, who left all such matters to his wife, was walking quietly up and down in a shady corner reading the *Westminster Review*,

his head protected by a wideawake of soft felt. He had just turned over a fresh page when his wife came puffing towards him, looking warm and tired.

"Those girls insist on coming two hours before anybody else, middair," said the Duchess, sinking into a garden-seat with a sigh of relief. "I told them it was all nonsense, but it was no use."

"What girls?" inquired the Duke, absently.

"Why, Beatrice and Edith, to be sure; and Miss Ashe, too. Of course Miss Ashe must have her finger in every pie. They say they are sure I shall overwork myself, and want to help me put the finishing touches."

"Well, that's very good of them, isn't it?" replied the Duke.

"I like that girl Beatrice," continued the Duchess, nodding her head approvingly. "She's a good girl, and a clever girl too. So is little Miss Edith. Ah! she'll make a good wife for somebody. Pity, you know, that she's got such a queer mother."

"Too late to change her now," remarked the Duke, drily.

"I rather like that young man Tresham, too," went on the Duchess. "Seems a very pleasant boy; not a bad companion for my friend Eric, either. Pore Eric! can't think how he gets on with that mother of his. Peculiar woman, very. I don't think she can be very happy, pore thing, somehow."

"By the way," put in the Duke, "have you invited Mr. Leech?"

"Lor, no, middair," replied the Duchess; "why, I don't even know the man by sight. But Mr. Insight's coming, and has promised to bring his daughter. Somehow or other, I feel that I shall like that girl."

"Ah! to be sure," rejoined the Duke. "They've been separated some time, haven't they? Hasn't she been on the Continent somewhere for the last few years?"

"She was at school in Germany, where her mother died," explained the Duchess; "and lately she was made a sort of pupil-teacher. Her pore old father 'll be glad to have her back again; he must have been very lonely living by himself all this time."

"How long is it since he saw his daughter?" inquired the Duke.

"About seventeen years, I think; not since she was quite a tiny child. There was some mystery about the wife, I fancy; it wasn't a very happy marriage. But I didn't like to ask."

"Of course not," assented the Duke. "I suppose your friend Lady Sharp is coming?"

"My friend, indeed!" chuckled her Grace. "Oh yes, she's coming. Why," continued the Duchess, as her eye turned towards the river which flowed past the lawn, "if

there isn't my old fisherman, Mr. Coxon, in his punt. Good morn'n', Mr. Coxon! Any sport this morn'n'?"

"Very fair sport indeed, your Grace," shouted the old fisherman, standing up and taking off his blue cap; "though it's over-bright for fly-fishing, too. I caught one uncommon fine trout a quarter of an hour ago."

"Come, hadn't you better go and begin to dress?" suggested the Duke, cutting the next page in his review. "It's getting on, you know."

"There's time enough, middair," returned his spouse; "I know what I'm about. I've half a mind to serve those hussies a trick for wanting to come so early. But now I must go into the greenhouse and see how Spriggs is getting on with those geraniums."

So saying, the Duchess struggled to her feet again, and disappeared. The Duke resumed his reading, turning over page after page as though he had never heard of such things as garden-parties, and had no idea of entertaining a hundred people that afternoon. He was a singular man, this City-bred, dried up Duke. The amount of good he did in an underhand way was past reckoning; but he never opened his lips upon the subject, leaving his wife to represent him in public and to do much what she liked with him in private. He appeared before the world as a rather dry, elderly gentleman, whose mission in life it

seemed to be to sit about in corners and sign enormous cheques. But his manners, though reserved, were far from forbidding, and there was not a man in Westlandshire, as there had previously not been a man in the City, who looked upon his Grace as other than honourable, generous, and kindly. On one occasion the Rev. Oriel St. Jerome had felt it his duty to drop a hint to the Duchess upon the subject of the Duke's non-attendance at church. "Sir," she had replied, impressively, "you have done your duty, and I know you mean it for the best. But never speak about this again. I tell you, Sir," continued the Duchess, her eyes sparkling like a pair of amethysts, "I tell you, Sir, the Duke's an angel! Nobody knows what the Duke is," she cried, her mouth working with emotion. Then a couple of bright tears fell upon her knitting, which she quickly dashed away. St. Jerome, being a sensible young man for all his Ritualism, took the hint; and the two parted as good friends as before.

At last, after reading for about half-an-hour, the Duke looked at his watch, and began to pace slowly towards the house. A beautiful marquee had been erected in the park, from the summit of which floated the ducal flag; the interior was fitted up as a floral reception-room, and glowed with masses of azaleas, roses, and other flowering shrubs, all in the zenith of their bloom; couches and garden-

chairs were arranged in convenient positions, while, in the centre, a plashing fountain flung its cool waters into the air, making a liquid music as they fell. A military band now put in an appearance; this was to be stationed at a short distance from the pavilion, and the musicians began to busy themselves in setting up their stands. Soon a rustle of dresses was heard outside, and three ladies presented themselves at the door of the marquee.

"Oh, how perfectly exquisite!" exclaimed Edith Charteris, as she gazed delightedly upon the splendid scene within. "O Beatrice, did you ever see anything so sweet?"

"Now that's what I call doing it well," remarked Miss Heath, approvingly. "Leave the Duchess alone for that. Those azaleas are something grand."

"I'm afraid, dears, we're rather late," observed Miss Ashe; "per'aps the Duchess will be wanting us. 'Adn't we better go and look for her?"

"Oh, do let us wait one minute," exclaimed Edith; "I do so want to look at those darling double stocks. Beatrice, suppose we walk round this way, and then we shall see all the flowers as we go."

"Come along, then," said Beatrice; and off they started on their tour, leaving Miss Ashe to hunt up the Duchess at her leisure. The two girls rambled about for nearly

half-an-hour, at the expiration of which Miss Ashe came bearing down upon them from the direction of the house.

"I can't find the Duchess anywhere," panted the indefatigable lady, "and I'm sure there must be lots to do still. Do come and help me look, there's dears; she'll never forgive us if we miss her, I'm afraid."

Thus urged, Beatrice and Edith agreed to accompany Miss Ashe, and the trio proceeded towards the lawn in front of the river, where they thought it most likely the Duchess would be found. But there was no trace of her anywhere, and even the two girls began to feel a little puzzled.

"I've been up and down, and round and round, and everywhere I can think of," said Miss Ashe, volubly, "and I can find her nowhere. I can't think where she can have got to."

"You may be sure her Grace isn't stowed away in any cupboard," replied Beatrice; "she must have plenty of elbow-room, that's one comfort. Come, let's hunt about; she's not so easily hidden."

"O Beatrice, do look at that funny old woman fishing," cried Edith. "See, she's caught a fish! She'll never get it on the punt. And whatever can induce her to wear a waterproof such a day as this?"

"Oh, never mind the old woman, dear," pleaded Miss Ashe, impatiently; "she's been there for the last half-hour.

Spriggs," cried she, to one of the under-gardeners, who came up at this instant, "have you seen her Grace anywhere about?"

"Not since two o'clock, miss," replied the man. "I've been looking for her myself."

"Well, she can't be lost, wherever she is," said Edith. "Let's go nearer the water; I want to see if that old goody will catch another fish."

So saying, she began to move cautiously across the lawn; in doing which she attracted the attention of Mr. Coxon, the fisherman, who had just baited another hook for his customer. What was Edith's surprise, then, when the old man stood up, and called out to her—

"Beg pardon, miss; but have you seen her Grace anywheres this afternoon?"

"Indeed we haven't," replied Edith; "we've been hunting for her this half-hour."

"Cur'ous," muttered the old man, as he sat down. Then Miss Ashe came bustling down to the water's edge, and called out—

"What did you say, my good man? Have you seen the Duchess anywhere?"

"I was jest a-askin' for her myself," cried back the old man. "She give me a order for some trout, and I want to show her what me and this old lady has been catchin'."

"Well, of all mysterious things," began Miss Ashe. "Ah! here's the Duke," she added, hopefully, as his Grace's angular figure was seen approaching from the house. "Pray, your Grace, can you tell me where the Duchess is?"

"No, I can't indeed," replied the Duke. "Have you been looking for her long?"

"Nearly an hour," said Beatrice, turning suddenly round and catching her skirts in a row of sweet-briar that ran along one side of the lawn down towards the bank. "There, now; I knew I should do it some day," she added, as a sound as of rending muslin was heard. "What a nuisance, to be sure!"

"You always will go too near that hedge, dear," observed Edith; "and now I shall have to sew it up for you, I suppose."

"Oh, don't go too near the hedge," exclaimed Miss Ashe, who had not remarked what passed; "it's very steep, and you might easily slip in. Oh," she continued, clasping her hands with an agonised expression, "suppose the dear Duchess should have had an accident and fallen into the water! O Duke! do you think there's any fear of anything dreadful having happened?"

"Ho, ho, ho! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" shouted a well-known voice from underneath the waterproof. Back went

the old woman's hood, and out popped the jovial face of the missing Duchess, radiant with good-humour and fun. "Oh, you ninnies!" shrieked her Grace, in high delight, as the old fisherman punted her alongside the bank. "I thought I'd serve you a trick! So, Miss Edith, I'm a 'funny old woman,' am I? and an 'old goody,' eh? O you little hussy! I'll pay you out for that!"

"O Duchess! how could you give us such a fright?" gushed Miss Ashe, before the two others had recovered from their astonishment. "I've been in the greatest alarm, and so has the Duke. We began to fear that you'd fallen into the river!"

"Margaret Ashe, you're a goose; and it's my belief that a goose you will always be," said the Duchess, as she was being hauled ashore. "Why, the Duke knew where I was all the time. But there! that's enough; the people will be here directly, and we mustn't be having any more fun. Gracious, what would old Turveydrop have said if he'd happened to come and catch me while I was in the punt?" Now "old Turveydrop" was the Duchess's usual nickname for the Duke of Grandchester.

The band here struck up a lively air, and the Duchess, throwing off her waterproof, appeared in a gala dress of rich purple silk, trimmed with delicate point lace. It was getting on for half-past three, and carriages were

already visible along the road. In less than a quarter of an hour the visitors began to arrive in numbers. The first to appear was Lady Sharp, who, as she came shuffling over the bright expanse of lawn to meet her hostess, looked exactly like a capacious blue-bottle swathed voluminously in crape. Then came Eric, with Captain Ricochet and the Rev. Arthur Tresham: Dr. Urquhart: a score or so of county people, and a sprinkling of the plutocracy, including Mr. Pound, the banker, and Mr. and Mrs. Buxom; and at length no less a personage than the Duke of Grandchester, accompanied by Lord Pulvilio, and escorting two ladies who were staying with Lady Gwendolen at Castle Sudds, whom he presented to the Duchess as Lady Gloatover and Lady Turquoise.

"Now this is really kind of you, Duke," said the Duchess, cordially, as she shook hands with her noble visitor. "I was almost beginning to be afraid you wouldn't come."

"I am only too much honoured by your Grace's kind permission to be present," replied the Duke of Grandchester, in lubricated accents. "I regret being compelled to offer excuses for my daughter, whose health does not admit of any violent outdoor exercises. What a very pretty prospect, to be sure!"

"It is quite too charming," smiled Lady Turquoise, a handsome young widow of thirty, radiant in kingfisher's plumes and gold embroidery. "I could almost envy your Grace this little paradise."

"Quite a number of respectable-looking persons, too," drawled Lady Gloatover, putting up a single eye-glass and glaring stonily in front of her. She was an odious old woman, bloated in figure and crabbed in temper, but of undeniable birth and breeding. "Pray, who is that tall young woman in a white gown?"

"That tall young lady in white, madam, is my particular friend Miss Heath," replied the Duchess, sweetly; and the Castle party strolled on. "How do you do, Mr. St. Jerome? I'm glad you've come; I think the Duke has something to say to you about the plans for those new schools of yours. Why, Mr. Tresham, I didn't see you before; I suppose you've been devoting yourself to Lady Sharp. I've been having such a bit of fun with those two girls; lor, you should have seen them hunting about everywhere for me, and Miss Ashe vowing I'd tumbled into the river, and there was I in front of them all the time, catching trout in Mr. Coxon's punt! I'm on my high ropes to-day; and who wouldn't be, with such heavenly weather? Ah! there's pore Mrs. Graham, with those two lovely little children of hers. Now that's really

kind of her; I do love children so. How d'ye do, Mrs. Graham? And how do *you* do, my pore little darl'ns?" she continued, almost burying the children alive in her voluminous embrace. "Lor, I don't know what I should do without having some little ones about me sometimes. I've got nearly a dozen coming this afternoon, altogether."

While the Duchess was running on in this way, and receiving her guests one after another, various scenes were taking place in other portions of the grounds. Tresham, in hopes of escaping Miss Ashe, who stood ready to pounce upon him at any moment, strolled about with Beatrice and Eric, chatting upon indifferent topics; while Edith paired off with Dr. Urquhart, who was already deriving a fund of entertainment from watching the party from Castle Sudds. The Duke of Grandchester was evidently as uncomfortable as an elderly nobleman, whose lubricated exterior was generally adequate to save him from all superfluous friction, could well be. In the first place, he felt himself utterly at odds in the country, but particularly as guest of the Duke of Moneysworth. He had not been able to avoid meeting the quondam stockbroker, and common etiquette, to say nothing of policy, demanded a certain interchange of courtesies; but the whole thing cost him many pangs. The Duchess, in particular, rubbed

him terribly the wrong way. Her brusque manners set his teeth on edge; her blunt remarks and audacious repartees occasioned him the most exquisite discomfort. Secondly, he found himself tied to Lady Gloatover, while he would far rather have been with Lady Turquoise. He would not acknowledge to himself that her ladyship was distasteful to him, on account of her undeniable birth and breeding; to have found fault with any person boasting such blue blood would have been, in his eyes, *lèse majesté* to his own order. But his Grace was nevertheless unconsciously conscious of the fact that, had Lady Gloatover been anybody else, there would have been no sacrilege in deeming her tedious, vulgar, and ill-natured. Lady Turquoise had of course fallen to the lot of Lord Pulvilio; but his lordship was unfortunately quite unable to appreciate her lively sallies, and so proved a dull companion in his turn. Then Miss Ashe commenced a little by-play for the amusement of onlookers. Whenever she saw the ducal party steering in a certain direction, she would dive precipitately along a short cut, and put herself in an attitude of discriminating rapture over some flower-bed or statuette which happened to lie in their way. Then, as they approached, she would leer up casually, with an insinuating smile; and when, as always occurred, she failed to call forth an answering glance, she would

overwhelm herself with graceful confusion, and flounce off to try her luck in a fresh corner. At last, when it had been a case of Miss Ashe discovered contemplating a flower-pot for the sixth time, she did succeed in attracting some little notice. Lady Gloatover, who was short-sighted, had nearly tripped over her twice; and on this occasion she distinctly heard the Duke observe—

"Er—who *is* that ubiquitous person in spectacles, I wonder?"

"One of the upper servants, I fancy," replied her ladyship. "I am surprised the Duchess should allow her to appear in the garden. She has been behaving as though we were a sort of Juggernaut, and she a Hindoo trying to get run over."

Miss Ashe did not waylay Lady Gloatover a seventh time, but made a bolt across the lawn with a view to besieging the Duchess. As she passed along, she overheard Eric exclaim—

"Hullo! I wonder who that is with old Insight?"

"It must be his daughter," observed Beatrice Heath. "I heard the Duchess say she expected her to-day."

"She looks uncommonly fetching from here," rejoined young Charteris. "Tresham, let's walk in that direction —eh?"

But Eric was too late. The Duchess had already

detected the approaching figures of the minister and his daughter, and started up to greet them. They were rather a singular-looking pair, and it cannot be denied that Mr. Insight's appearance was somewhat out of harmony with his surroundings. His frail body and thin legs contrasted strangely with the massive head which surmounted them; his dress was threadbare and old-fashioned, though scrupulously clean and neat: still, in spite of all these incongruities, the humble minister looked and spoke unmistakably as a gentleman. He was more at his ease, a good deal, than the girl who walked beside him. The relationship that existed between the two would scarcely have been detected by a casual observer. She had much bright expressiveness of eye, and a watchful, bird-like glance; her features were decidedly irregular, yet the general effect was attractive,—compelling notice, yet creating disappointment by a sense that there was something wanting. She was rather a graceful girl, with a semi-foreign air about her which was not without its piquancy. Her dress consisted of imitation black lace, somewhat fantastically worn; but what puzzled a stranger most of all was the expression of her mouth. At first it appeared rather a pretty, saucy mouth; closer observation, however, revealed lines that were not so easy to decipher, and which seemed to suggest a certain hardness and cynicism,

approaching almost to the sardonic, detracting from the pleasant first impression. The two advanced slowly amid the stares of the more fashionable guests, and made straight for the marquee where the Duchess was awaiting their approach.

"Better late than never, Mr. Insight," cried her Grace, as they came up. "I've been expecting you for the last hour and a half. Come inside the pavilion and sit down; I've been on my feet all day, and long to get a little rest."

"We were late in starting," replied Mr. Insight, in a deep, bell-like voice, "and were further detained upon the road. Allow me to present my daughter Naomi, whom your Grace was kind enough to include in your invitation."

Miss Insight dropped her eyes with a pretty, startled look as she curtseyed low in acknowledgment of the Duchess's kindly greeting; and the Duchess thought she had never seen a more modest and unassuming young woman. The instant, however, that the elder lady turned again towards the minister, the girl's face underwent a sudden change. The pretty bashfulness disappeared altogether from her eyes, and she darted a furtive glance of sharp scrutiny at her entertainer; the corners of her mobile little mouth drooped with a somewhat mocking

expression, and a peculiar wrinkle passed rapidly over her brow. The next moment they were all sitting together in the marquee.

"Well, Mr. Insight," said the Duchess, "I must congratulate you upon having got your daughter back from abroad. It must be a great comfort to you to have her to keep house for you."

"It is so, madam," replied the minister, with some reserve. "We have been separated for many years, and I am well pleased that she is once more beneath my roof."

"And you, Miss Naomi," continued the Duchess; "you must be glad to be with your father again, to take care of him, and see that he's got everything he wants, I suppose?"

"Certainly, my lady," said Naomi; "it is my duty, of course."

"Duty!" humphed the Duchess, rather taken aback; "and your pleasure too, isn't it? It's always a great thing when duty and pleasure go hand in hand. You know your father's a great friend of mine, and I take a deal of interest in all that concerns him. How do you like England after the Continent?"

"I intend to like it very much," replied Naomi. "Father has often told me what a beautiful place you

have here, and how kind your Grace has always been to him. I used often to wish I could meet your Grace, in order to thank you for all your kindness to my father."

Down dropped the witching eyes once more, and then came the strange, discordant change of expression. The Duchess was quite touched by the modulated sweetness of the girl's voice, and the filial sentiment it uttered. "I think very highly of your father," she observed, forgetting for the moment that he was sitting next to her. Then, turning to Mr. Insight, she added, in a cheerful tone—

"Doesn't everything look beautiful to-day?"

"Beautiful indeed," responded Mr. Insight, with a far-off look in his big dreamy eyes. "Almost beautiful enough to make one desire a long life, irrespective of what may lie in store for us in the future."

"Oh, let the future take care of itself," rejoined the Duchess; "I don't believe in cultivating habits of foreboding. But come, Miss Naomi, I must increase the circle of your acquaintance. Mr. Tresham!" she cried, as Tresham, Beatrice, and Eric passed the door of the marquee, "come here a minute, will you? Come you too, master Eric, I want to introduce you to a new young friend of mine. This is the Rev. Mr. Tresham, Miss Naomi; and this is one of my boys, as I call him—Mr.

Eric Charteris. Now, I've got to go and look after something, so I'll leave you all together."

No cynical curling of the lip, now, on the part of Naomi Insight; no shadow of embarrassment or awkwardness, such as had been visible on her presentation to the Duchess. Had she been a young princess, she could scarcely have preserved an attitude of more graceful *insouciance*, as, without stirring in her seat, she acknowledged the introduction with a stately little bend. Her father looked on with mingled wistfulness and admiration, and a barely perceptible sigh escaped his lips.

"And how do you like this sort of thing, Miss Insight?" said Eric, by way of commencing a conversation, as he twirled his lilac gloves.

"I think it's enchanting," replied Naomi, brightly. "I have never experienced anything more delightful in my life."

"It's a pity the world can't be all The Hyacinths, isn't it?" said Tresham, with a smile.

"A thousand pities," answered the girl. "I daresay it's dull enough in the streets at this moment; and we can't stay here for ever, unfortunately."

"Would you wish to stay here for ever, Naomi?" asked her father, with a smile.

"Come now, Mr. Insight; wouldn't *you?*" interposed

Eric, laughing. "I'm sure I should; though I dare say I should get tired of it by to-morrow. What do you say, Tresham?"

"I dare say life would be as much worth living here as anywhere else," said Tresham, carelessly. "You've read the lucubrations of Mr. Mallock on that subject, of course, Miss Insight?"

"Mallock?" echoed Naomi, looking rather bewildered.

"Ah! I forgot; you've been on the Continent so long. Hullo! there's the band playing the 'Roast Beef of Old England;' I suppose that portends a meal. Shall we stroll along?"

Mr. Insight and Naomi rose from their seats, and the four proceeded to where the company appeared to be converging towards the Duchess. Beatrice and Edith were already by her side, and as they came up they heard her say—

"Well, and where do you think we're going now?"

"To dinner?" asked Edith.

"We're all going to the Rockery," proclaimed the Duchess; "we're going to have a picnic in the open air, and then we shall all have a dance under the dome. Come, young people, pair yourselves off; I shall be with you directly."

A general move was now made towards Laburnum Lake,

which, as my readers may remember, was situated in that part of the grounds which had been purposely left in its primitive condition of nature. The pathway gradually narrowed between two shelving banks covered with exquisite ferns, until it became a deep, winding gorge, called the Pleached Walk, over which the trees towered grandly on either side, and, meeting in the centre, formed one long arch of foliage. This continued for about three hundred yards, and then the Rockery burst suddenly into view, like a wonderful theatrical effect. It was of a long horse-shoe shape, and appeared a confused mass of ferns, wild-flowers, and fantastically-disposed boulders of rock; majestic oaks and elms innumerable rose upon all sides, and the whole expanse was carpeted with the finest and most elastic moss. The background was filled in by the clear waters of Laburnum Lake, now rosy with the westering sun; miniature precipices and liliputian crags diversified the landscape, and the air resounded with the evensong of a myriad birds. An exclamation of wonder and delight burst from the lips of everybody as the scene displayed itself, no one being more impressed by the *coup-d'œil* than Mr. Insight, whose perception of the beautiful was exquisitely keen. On a broad strip of rock-bound sward overlooking the lake stood tables laden with the choicest materials for a picnic; no Olympian banquet of

ambrosia, indeed, but everything in the shape of solid and agreeable food calculated to please the eye as well as delight the palate.

"Very rustic, indeed," croaked Lady Gloatover, as she surveyed the scene through her single eyeglass. "But, heavens and earth! are we all to sit upon our thumbs?"

"Not unless your ladyship prefers," replied the Duchess, who had overheard the observation. "There are plenty of chairs and cushions for those who are afraid of spoiling their frocks. Come, Lord Pulvilio, I hope you've managed to get up an appetite this afternoon?"

"Civilised people never have appetites," replied his lordship, calmly.

"Lor!" exclaimed the Duchess.

"Appetite is, no doubt, a vulgar weakness, confined exclusively to the brute creation and the lower orders of society," remarked Dr. Urquhart, imperturbably; "it is a degrading heritage bequeathed by our quadrumanous ancestors to their more immediate descendants, and is generally ignored in polite society. As, however, I lay no claim to being a civilised person, I have no shame in confessing myself extremely hungry."

"And I, too," said Lady Turquoise, laughing; "at the present moment I am free to acknowledge myself a perfect savage."

The company now broke up into little knots and groups, disposing themselves here and there as the fancy took them. Most of the ladies took advantage of the rugs, cushions, camp-stools and folding-chairs, of which a liberal provision had been made, while the men sat about on such hummocks and boulders as were most convenient for the plying of knives and forks. The Duke of Moneysworth—of whom we have rather lost sight lately—after wandering about and making sure in his own quiet way that everybody was well accommodated, clambered cautiously up an easy bit of rock, and succeeded in balancing himself with some difficulty upon the top of it. The situation had the advantage of seclusion; but it must have been excruciatingly uncomfortable. The poor Duke, sitting in an oblique posture, with one knee nearly as high as his head, and the other propped against the trunk of an old tree to keep himself secure, looked all angles, like a complicated diagram in geometry; while the difficulty of cutting up his food was enhanced by sudden puffs of wind, which threatened every now and then to carry off his hat. The truth was, that he had been against this picnic scheme from the first, and had recommended an ordinary sit-down collation in the marquee; but the Duchess had set her heart on doing something out of the common, and had, as usual, carried out her plan.

"Gracious heavens!" exclaimed Lady Gloatover, flattening her single eyeglass against her right eye, "if there isn't that woman who was stalking us so perseveringly over the grounds this afternoon. What in the name of all that's extraordinary are those round flat things she's got on the side of her head?"

"Which do you mean?" said the Duke of Grandchester, slightly turning his chin with a well-oiled movement in the direction indicated. "Is that the person, with a sort of blue antimacassar over her shoulders?"

"Yes," returned her ladyship; "what *are* those things she's stuck upon her head?"

"They look to me like rather large paper chrysanthemums," rejoined his Grace, with interest.

"Paper chrysanthemums!" echoed the lady; "I declare I thought they were mince-pies. One never knows what to expect. May I trouble you for a slice or two of that cold capon?"

"Lady Turquoise, you have no champagne," said Dr. Urquhart. "Allow me to recommend a glass of this dry Monopole."

"Mrs. Graham," screamed the Duchess, "I hope you are being well looked after? What will Tottie and Lulu have to eat?"

"Thank you, they have some nice jelly, your Grace,"

replied Mrs. Graham, a pale, rather sad-looking woman in half-mourning, with two chubby little daughters. "We are all well supplied."

"Will Tottie have a macaroon?" asked the Duchess, offering a plate of those dainties to the child with a beaming smile.

"No, fank you," lisped Tottie, wistfully.

"Then *you* will, I'm sure," said the Duchess, passing the plate on to the other little girl.

Lulu shook her head shyly.

"Oh, do take one, dear," continued the Duchess; "they won't hurt you." So Lulu was prevailed upon, and took a cake.

"You didn't preth *me*," murmured Tottie, the corners of her little mouth beginning to quiver with disappointment as she saw the cakes vanishing.

"Didn't I press you, my little darl'n!" cried the Duchess, remorsefully. "No more I did. There, you pore little trot; there's a big cake for you to make up. But where's the Duke? I haven't seen him this half-hour. Lor, if he isn't up there on the top of that rock! If that isn't just like the Duke. I say, middair old king!"

"Well," replied that potentate, who had never looked less regal in his life than at that particular moment.

"Are you comfortable up there, middair?" shouted the Duchess.

"No," replied the Duke.

"Then why don't you come and sit here?" almost screamed his wife; while a chorus of expostulations arose, nearly a score of persons scrambling to their feet and imploring his Grace, as a personal favour to themselves, to come and take their places near the table.

"Here's a charming seat for your Grace," gushed Miss Ashe, in her most effusive manner; "I assure you I've quite finished. Let me persuade you, Duke—just to oblige me!"

"No, no, *no*," groaned the Duke, shutting his eyes and screwing up his face as though in torture, as he beat the air impatiently with one hand. "Just leave me alone, there's good souls. I'm very well where I am."

"Margaret Ashe, keep your eye on your own plate," said the Duchess, severely. "Ah! there's the band at last," she added, as a prettily decorated barge appeared on the lake, the musicians playing as they advanced. "I thought I missed something. We're going to have a dance under the dome as soon as the moon's well up. I'm so sorry Lady Gwendolen couldn't come."

"I fear that even had she been here she would scarcely have been able to join in the dance," remarked the Duke of Grandchester.

"Why not?" demanded the Duchess.

"Does not your Grace burn gas?" inquired the Duke, insinuatingly. "Lady Gwendolen never goes to any place where gas is burnt. That's quite a rule with her."

"But why?" asked the Duchess. "She's not afraid of an explosion, is she?"

"Oh, no," rejoined the Duke; "it's not that. The reason is that gas would be detrimental to her jewels. We always burn wax-candles at the Castle."

"Lor! 'twouldn't hurt 'em if they're real," retorted the Duchess, with a sort of snort. "However, to-night we're going to dance by moonlight, if everybody's willing. There'll be a splendid moon in about an hour or so."

"Dance by moonlight? Oh, how exquisite!" exclaimed Naomi, who had overheard the words. "Mr. Tresham, you don't object to dancing, do you?"

"Not at all, so long as nobody asks *me* to dance," said Tresham, smiling. "I am no dancing-bear."

"Why, what would you do if anybody did ask you?" answered the girl, with a pretty movement of her head.

"No one ever did such a thing," said Tresham, "and I don't suppose that anybody ever will. At any rate, I hope that you won't."

"Why?" asked Naomi, looking at him.

Tresham paused; and then, looking straight at her, replied—

"Because I should not be able to refuse."

Naomi dropped her eyes in silence, thus leaving the words lingering in both their ears. Tresham knew that he had said a foolish thing, but he felt at that moment that he could say it again without any shame, and would, too, if occasion offered. He did not try to analyse his feelings; but he was conscious that a subtle influence was stealing over him, such as he had never felt before, and he knew, too, that the witchery was exercised by this raw girl, whom he had only met about an hour previously. It had been by the purest chance that he found himself sitting next to Naomi, and at first the only words he had spoken to her were confined to the ordinary civilities of the table. But the longer he had talked with her, and observed the constant changes of her face, the more interested he had become; although she had said nothing in the least clever or original, and was certainly deficient in the natural high-breeding which distinguished both Edith Charteris and Beatrice Heath. He was just meditating a fresh remark when the Duchess gave the signal for a move, and the party began to converge towards the ravine leading to the house.

It was a superlatively lovely evening. The far-off outlines of the Craigie Hills loomed bluely through the air, changing slowly from pale azure to pale violet, then fading

into a soft Quaker drab as they finally retired behind the twilight mist. The sun had set beyond the Laburnum Lake in a deep crimson haze, and the moon was just meandering up the sky, bathing the entire landscape in a great flood of liquid light, while the placid water rippled into silken lines. Tresham walked slowly along by the side of Naomi, followed by her father; at a short distance behind them came Dr. Urquhart, while Eric brought up the rear with Beatrice, Edith, and Miss Ashe.

"Oh, did anybody ever see such a lovely moon!" exclaimed the last-named lady. "I often picture to myself what the moon is like in reality. Who knows that it is not the 'ome of lofty and spiritual intelligences like ourselves?"

Eric stuffed his handkerchief between his lips, and cast a comical glance at Beatrice that nearly made that young lady laugh outright. Miss Ashe went on, in no way disconcerted—

"And pray, why shouldn't it be? I should think the scenery of the moon must be most romantic. Fancy how beautiful it must be always to live in the moonlight! We've all heard of the Mountains of the Moon; why shouldn't there be rivers, and flowers, and trees, as there are upon the earth?"

"Why, Miss Ashe, you must have been reading about

the celebrated Lunar Hoax," said Dr. Urquhart, turning round with a smile.

"Hoaks?" exclaimed Miss Ashe, in wondering delight; "then there really are hoaks in the moon? Well, I never was more surprised. But I had a strong impression there must be forests of some sort, and it's really astonishing how often my impressions turn out true. Well, 'ere we are at last, and now for the most delightful part of the day."

The hall where the dance was to take place was a large octagonal room, projecting a considerable distance from the main portion of the house itself. It was covered by an enormous dome, consisting of eight panels of glass converging towards the apex, while the eight walls were, in fact, highly decorated stained-glass windows, the intervening spaces being made to represent ornamental window-frames. The effect produced by the moonbeams streaming in through the transparent roof and sides was striking in the extreme, and was greatly enhanced when the hall was filled with people and the dance commenced. Nothing could have been weirder or more fairylike than the sight of those elegantly-dressed women moving gracefully to and fro in the floods of moonlight which poured in, imparting to each fair face an almost unearthly pallor; the enchanting music of the then fashionable Faust waltz was wafted

from one of the inner rooms, and, as each gliding figure cast its shadow on the floor, it required no very vivid imagination to fancy the whole pageant a phantasmagorical illusion—a lovely but disordered dream, evoked by memories of the haunting resurrection-scene in "Roberto." Tresham stood for a full hour, leaning against the wall, unable to take his infatuated eyes off Naomi. How magically the moonlight transfigured that cheap lace dress of hers, till its lissom folds seemed the veritable drapery of a Queen of Night! Beatrice, with her firmly-rounded chin, and creamy paleness, and dusky hair, from which the moon-beams struck fleeting flashes of dull gold, was a woman to be worshipped and admired; but Naomi, with hardly a feature to recommend her, cast a spell upon him that, like the shirt of Nessus, was fast eating into his very being. He felt, as yet, no well-defined love for her; he simply felt that in some mysterious way he was no longer his own master. A strange and hitherto undreamt-of fascination was acquiring control over him; he was dimly conscious of an electric ecstasy within, beyond his power to quench or moderate. For a full hour did Tresham resign himself to the combined influences of the scene, a passive prey to the inroads of that insidious poison which is so great a curse to man. Then, with a violent effort, he roused himself from his reverie, and abruptly left the house.

CHAPTER VII.

FACILIS DESCENSUS AVERNI.

When Tresham awoke the following morning, it was with a confused sense that something strange had happened to him the night before. A flood of mingled recollections poured through his brain, none of them very clear, and none altogether satisfactory; and he lay perfectly still for some time, trying to sort the tangled skein of memories and bring the different threads into something like distinctness. Then he went carefully over the events of the afternoon. He had been introduced, in rather an offhand manner, to a young girl in a shabby black-lace dress, whom he knew to be the daughter of a Dissenting minister in the town. He had addressed a few commonplace remarks to her, and her replies—really he almost forgot what her replies had been; nothing very worthy of remembrance, at any rate. Then he had walked to the Rockery with her, and, by the purest chance, found himself sitting next to her during the picnic. Nothing, certainly, had happened to him so far. But from that moment, he remembered

having become first interested, and then attracted; and here it was that he found himself unable to give a very clear account of what had passed. Now a pretty woman rarely looks to less advantage than when eating; even admirers of the sex, I am told, acknowledge that. And Tresham was by no means an enthusiastic admirer of the sex; on the contrary, he troubled his head very little about women in any way; yet it was during that ill-omened meal in the Rockery that the mischief, if any, had been done. But what *was* the mischief? And where was the attraction that had wrought it? If a man has been stunned by a blow, or lost his senses by a fall, it only requires a little judicious pounding, or probing, or pummelling, to discover the extent of the mishap; but alas! where the injury is internal the patient may bleed to death before the seat of the concussion can be reached. Tresham felt like a man just waking up from a disagreeable dream of having broken his leg, induced by an attack of cramp. In the first place, there could have been no real attraction. Naomi Insight was an irregular-featured girl, with no particular style about her, and certainly under-educated. Why, she hadn't a decent feature in her face—except, perhaps, her eyes; yes, she certainly had rather witching eyes; and then her mouth—a curious, restless, lissom little mouth, all curves and archness; there certainly was some-

thing to be said for her mouth; but Heaven bless us all, is a man going to lose his senses, his intellect, his freedom, because a woman knows how to contort her face becomingly? Then he remembered, with a painful twinge, that he had made some idiotic remark to her about dancing; said that he would dance all night with her, if she asked him to; and that not in a light or chaffing way, but in desperate earnest, as though he meant it. And her father must have overheard it, too! An interesting old man, that Mr. Insight; and what a moonstruck, empty-pated fool he must have seemed in Mr. Insight's eyes!—"Tresham, you're an ass," said Common-sense unflinchingly; and the wretched victim was conscious of much comfort in the sentence. To know one's disease is to be half-cured; he was not really hurt; he had only got an ugly knock, which would serve him as a wholesome warning for the future.

Animated by the pleasing hallucination into which his already perverted judgment had betrayed him, the doomed man sprang out of bed and began to dress, whistling a tune the while. The horrid scare was but a nightmare after all. Common-sense had told him so. He would bear with a smiling face the smart caused by the recollection of his foolish speeches, for very joy at his deliverance from danger. The affair now began to look quite like

a joke. There was the sun shining brightly in, as though nothing at all had happened; and there were the schools to be visited, and a sermon to be written, and perhaps a battle fought with one of his churchwardens about some contemplated innovations in the musical part of his church services—the world, in fact, was going round as usual, and Philip was himself again. And thus it often is. *C'est un mauvais signe quand un malade ne sent pas sa maladie*, said the doctor to Monsieur de Pourceaugnac. Thus it is with a man who has been bitten by a mad dog; he feels the sore caused by the brute's teeth, so he goes to some bland apothecary, who cuts out a wedge of flesh and cauterises the wound, assuring him that all danger of hydrophobia is now over. Away he walks, with a light and thankful heart, and for weeks, maybe, thinks nothing of the matter; but *the poison is in his veins*, and suddenly he feels an awful thirst, which, somehow, he dares not quench; he has frightful spasms in his throat, and hideous spectres grin before his eyes, mocking his anguish; and then he foams, and barks, and bites, screaming to be delivered, until the climax comes, and he is convulsed to death.

After a hurried breakfast, Tresham, too nervous to sit still, put on his hat and sallied out to visit Mr. Pound. Now Mr. Pound, as has been stated, was a wealthy

bachelor; he was also the leading banker in that part of the country, and a very crusty man. As one of the wardens of the district church, he was rather a thorn in Tresham's side, for he was much given to opposing all the little reformations which that active person laid himself out to effect; and Tresham, in his present state of mind, thought that nothing would do him more good than a wholesome tussle with somebody. With this eminently Christian end in view, therefore, the young incumbent bent his steps towards the bank, where he hoped to beard his foe. The point at stake was the introduction of a full choral service on Sundays; and Mr. Pound, who detested music, had resolutely set his face against the change. Tresham felt particularly huffy about it, and was determined to bear down all opposition; and, being much more popular in the congregation than his cantankerous churchwarden, counted upon easy victory. Just, however, as he turned the corner of Market Street, and came within sight of his enemy's stronghold, he saw the heavy glass doors of the banking-house swing open, and the next moment up strode Eric Charteris—as pleasant and bright a specimen of young English manhood as one would wish to see.

"Hullo!" exclaimed the youth; "why, who would have thought of meeting you, of all people, at this hour of the morning? Where are you off to now?"

"I'm just going in to see Mr. Pound for a minute or two," said Tresham, shaking hands.

"That I'm sure you're not, old man," returned young Charteris; "I've just been wanting to see him myself, on some business for the mater, and he's in bed with the jaundice and can't see anybody."

"Jaundice?" repeated Tresham. "Impossible! why, he was all right yesterday; I saw him myself at The Hyacinths."

"So did several other people," replied Eric, "but he wasn't all right for all that. He was seedy when he went, and had to go away about five o'clock. Urquhart's just been in to have a look at him, and says he's in for a dose of the crocuses."

"Well, I'm sorry for that," said Tresham, thoughtfully; "it'll make him more cantankerous than ever. But come, you've nothing particular to do; walk down with me as far as the schools."

"I'm your man," said Eric, linking his arm within the parson's, "so long as you don't ask me to take a class. I say, how very jolly it was yesterday, wasn't it? Where did you get to, by the way? I looked for you everywhere after the dance."

"I had had enough of it," said Tresham, carelessly; "I left about nine o'clock."

"I say, look here, Tresham," went on Eric; "what did you think of old Insight's daughter? Do you know, I'm awful spoons; I intend to cultivate acquaintance in that quarter. Old Insight himself isn't half a bad sort; and the fair Naomi is no end fetching, let me tell you. I walked home with them last night. What a duffer you were to go away so soon!"

All poor Tresham's new-found strength gave way at this rough and unexpected onslaught. He bit his lip angrily, and flushed as though in pain; then, with a slight frown, said in a tone of some annoyance—

"What nonsense you do talk, Eric."

"Nonsense?" repeated Eric; "well, I like that. But of course an old stick-in-the-mud like you can't be expected to take any interest in pretty women. I tell you, I'm just on it; it's a case, I do assure you. You might sympathise with a fellow a bit, just to keep up his spirits," added the innocent youth, by way of smoothing Tresham down.

Tresham had now recovered himself sufficiently to recognise the process he was undergoing. He had been badly bitten, and it was necessary that the wound should be cauterised—a painful process at the best; why, then, should he be angry with Eric for performing so wholesome and requisite an operation? He might wince, but that was unavoidable. Young Charteris might rattle on to his

heart's content—the faster, indeed, the better; anything to complete his cure, and render all danger of a relapse impossible.

"And what's to be the end of it?" he asked, forcing an awkward smile.

"The end?" cried Eric; "oh, blow the end; time enough to think of that. Why, we've hardly made a beginning yet. I only want to have a bit of fun; no harm in that, is there?"

"I don't suppose so," answered Tresham, absently.

"Well now, look here," pursued young Charteris; "I'll tell you what I want you to do. Come and call with me this afternoon. We'll go about three o'clock. I'm awfully bent on seeing her again. Will you?"

"Most emphatically not," said Tresham. "*I*'m not going to help you in your amours; it's like your audacity to ask it. Go in and win on your own account—I wish you all success."

"Well, you *are* a fellow," said Charteris, in good-humoured disappointment. "A regular old dog-in-the-manger, upon my word you are. I shall take to going to chapel, I think—they say old Insight's sermons are something out of the common. What would you say to that?"

"I think you might do far worse," replied Tresham. "I believe him to be a head-and-shoulders above the best of

us—perhaps rather too much so for some. Isn't that our friend the Captain coming this way?"

"By Jove, so it is!" exclaimed Eric, whose thoughts were easily turned aside. "Well met, warrior," he went on, boisterously shaking hands with Ricochet. "Here's the parson just as cross and contrary as he can be; you can't think how he's been snubbing me. Come along and help me to put him into rather a better humour."

"Why, what's the matter, Tresham?" said the Captain, with a pleasant smile.

"Nothing's the matter," replied Tresham, smiling too; "it's only this boy's nonsense. I was going to see Pound this morning about that choir business; but Eric, here, tells me he's laid up with jaundice."

"Really?" said Ricochet, not looking very much concerned. "Then I'll tell you what — we'll just go straight on without consulting him. He can't prevent that, and by the time he's about again, the thing will have become an institution. We'll go through the music with the boys to-morrow afternoon," added the Captain, who was an enthusiastic musician, and one of the most prominent members of Tresham's amateur choir. "It's very easy, and we can get the notices stuck up in the church by Saturday week, so that the people shan't be taken by surprise."

"I'm perfectly willing," said Tresham. "Good-bye;

I've got to look in at the schools, and may be detained some time. Good-bye, Eric; perhaps you'll find Ricochet more amenable to your projects than I am."

"Will you dine with me this evening, both of you?" said Ricochet, as they were separating.

"Like a bird," replied Eric, gaily; "and you'll come too, won't you, Tresham?"

"With pleasure," said the parson.

"At seven, then," said Ricochet; and he and Eric walked off together, leaving Tresham to pursue his pastoral visitations. Arrived at the schools, the young man threw himself into the task of supervision and examination with feverish energy. He looked carefully into all the books that were being used, subjecting each volume to rapid criticism; put a number of pointed questions, on as many different subjects, to the scholars; made inquiries as to the respective merits and attainments of the principal pupils, as well as to their names and ages; and finally entered into a long and animated conversation with the schoolmaster, to whom the visitation was almost as trying an ordeal as to the boys themselves. Tresham had determined upon having a good surpliced choir in his church, and intended that it should be largely recruited from the members of this school; and as the teacher was a man of fair musical abilities, there was not much difficulty in

enlisting his services in the scheme. He would be able, he opined, to furnish at any rate a dozen or fourteen boys, of good character and suitable voices; basses and tenors there were already among the amateur choir which then existed; the surplices and cassocks would be provided by Tresham himself. These and other points of equal consequence having been talked over and arranged, Tresham looked at his watch, and, finding that it was nearly one o'clock, jumped up hastily and took his leave. He walked rapidly back through the sunny streets—almost deserted at that hour, for Heathercombe was just sitting down to dinner; arrived at home, snatched a hasty lunch, and then retired to his study to think over his Sunday-morning sermon. Now sermon-writing was a delightful occupation to this young man. When he had no special subject in his head, he would pitch upon a text almost at random, and then brood over it for perhaps an hour, walking up and down the room with a cigar in his mouth until all the latent ideas and suggestions enfolded in it gradually developed themselves before his mind. There was generally something original in Tresham's sermons; he had the knack of presenting truths in a new and vivid light, which always left a distinct impression upon the minds of his hearers; and he never told his congregation anything that he did not thoroughly believe himself. On

the present occasion he selected as the text of his discourse the words "Man did eat angels' food;" and a very pointed sermon he wrote upon it, showing how very possible it was for people to be fed with meat from God's own stores, nourishment intended for spiritual and heavenly intelligences, calculated to transform them into the Divine image itself, and yet to remain, like the Israelites of old, a stubborn and rebellious generation. Occasionally he fell into the snare of putting fanciful interpretations upon his texts; it was a temptation, however, to which he was fully alive, and he was wont to guard himself against it. One of his professors at the University had once administered a quaint and gentle reproof to him for this bad habit, and Tresham had not forgotten it. He had written a particularly foolish sermon, based upon what was really an egregious play upon the words of an otherwise harmless text; and the Don took him good-humouredly to task, congratulating him, with friendly irony, upon the valuable vein of exegesis he had discovered. "On your principle," said Dr. Paradigm, "there is no subject under heaven upon which you cannot force the Bible to lay down an authoritative law, so long as you continue a good punster. Let me recommend you, next time you preach, to take that passage which informs us that it is that which comes out of a man, not that which goes in, which defiles him.

You may improve greatly upon James the First's interpretation by showing that, while smoking is directly contrary to the Word of God, no embargo of any kind is laid upon taking snuff."

Tresham wrote on till nearly half-past three, when there came a rap at his door. "Come in!" he cried; and in stepped his landlady, a matronly person with a round, good-humoured face and floury hands, fresh from the pudding-board downstairs.

"Well, Mrs. Crump, and what's the news to-day?" said Tresham, throwing himself back in his chair with a half-stifled yawn.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Sir," said Mrs. Crump, "but the poor woman in Jordan Lane's been took very bad again, and I doubt she'll not pull through. The 'usband's sent up all in a hurry to know if you couldn't go down and see her for a bit; she's been frettin' for you, he says, all the mornin'."

"Confound it! if I hadn't almost forgotten that poor soul," exclaimed Tresham, springing up with a jerk. "Why didn't they send up to me before? All right; I'll be off at once. And, Mrs. Crump, just put up a cupful of that port-wine jelly you made the other day; and anything else you can think of that might do her good. You can send it along by the messenger."

"I'll see to it, Sir," said Mrs. Crump, disappearing briskly; and Tresham, seizing his hat, started off at his usually energetic pace towards the slums where the dying woman lived. It is not necessary for us to follow him. Whatever Tresham's shortcomings may have been—and he had not a few—want of sympathetic tenderness was not among them. Many were the sufferers who, stretched on beds of anguish, had cause to bless him during his pastoral career; many were the dying whom he soothed, and the wanderers whom, by his practical and genial counsels, he reclaimed. His disposition was naturally such as to render the parade of pulpit eloquence rather a snare to him; for which reason he made a point of attending all the closer to the more painful and trying duties of a pastor's lot, from which his innate nervousness prompted him, at first, to shrink. After remaining with the sick woman for a considerable time, during which he did not fail to furnish her with bodily as well as spiritual consolation, he left the cottage, feeling happier and calmer than he had felt before; since, by a beautiful paradox in our complex nature, there is nothing so sure to relieve us of our own sorrows as relieving or participating in the sorrows of another. He strolled thoughtfully along the quiet country road, enjoying the fresh, cool air, and pleasant evening sunshine. The hedges were green and fragrant; the

meadows sent forth a sweet, countrified perfume, and the distant tinkle of the sheep-bells fell musically on his ear. Nothing, he thought, was wanting to his contentment but the absence of a certain disagreeable suspicion that every now and then insisted on obtruding itself—a suspicion that possibly, after all, there was that within him which might arise at any moment and call him slave.

In a short time he turned, and retraced his steps to the town. He had not proceeded far, when he became conscious of approaching footsteps; and the next moment a deep, bell-like voice greeted him in cordial tones. He looked up, and confronted—Mr. Insight.

"I am happy in chancing to overtake you, Mr. Tresham," said the minister, not noticing the hot flush which had mounted to the young man's brow. "I think I saw you coming out of poor Mistress Pilgrim's a short while since. Hers is a sad case, I fear."

"I am afraid it is only a question of time," replied Tresham. "She is terribly weak to-day, and appears to be sinking fast."

"Are you going my way?" continued Mr. Insight. "If so, I shall be glad to bear you company. You are no worse, I trust, for all the frolicking of yesterday?"

"Not the least in the world," said Tresham, laughing nervously. "I hope—Miss Insight is quite well?"

"Quite, quite," replied the other. "Let me persuade you to come in and drink a cup of tea with us; it is just on the stroke of five, and I fancy Naomi will have something to entertain us with. You can spare us half-an-hour, surely?"

"Gladly," assented Tresham, feeling that he was about to rush upon his own destruction. He walked silently along by the side of his companion until they reached the door of Mr. Insight's modest home. The minister ushered him in with old-fashioned courtesy, and then opened a door which led into a small, neat, but poorly-furnished sitting-room. The table was already laid for tea; and in the grate there flickered a tiny bit of fire, on which a kettle was singing lustily. "I am always partial to the sight of a fire towards evening," explained Mr. Insight, "even so late in the season as this. I am constitutionally rather a chilly mortal. But where's Naomi?"

"Coming, dear," replied a quick voice, just outside the door. "You've not been waiting long, have you?" Upon which the lithe, black figure of the minister's young daughter appeared in the doorway, and Tresham once more gazed upon the face he so loved and feared. A faint rose-blush tinged the pale brown of her olive cheek as she perceived the visitor, and the sloe-black eyes drooped for a moment as she put out her hand and bade him welcome to the house.

"Mr. Tresham has come to drink a cup of tea with us, my dear," said Mr. Insight; "and let us hope that it will not be the last, as well as the first, that he will take under our roof. Come, my dear Sir, let us take our seats."

Naomi turned quickly round, and, opening a cupboard in the wall, whipped out a large plum-cake and a plate of unbaked crumpets, which she put deftly on the table. It was one of Mr. Insight's small heresies not to say grace at tea, and the next moment Tresham was refreshing himself with a large cup of some delicious mixture that soon relieved his previous exhaustion. He had been working hard all day, and had eaten next to nothing; but this fragrant infusion put new life into him, and he felt himself getting better every minute.

"I hope you're no worse for our delightful dissipation yesterday, Miss Insight?" he remarked at last.

"Worse?" echoed Naomi; "I'm all the better for it, a great deal. One needs a fillip now and then to keep one going, and yesterday—oh, it was delicious!"

"And what part of the entertainment did you enjoy most?" pursued Tresham, smiling.

"The dancing," answered Naomi, promptly. "Which did you?"

"The picnic, I think," said Tresham, rather slowly.

"Oh, what a confession!" laughed the girl. "And

which part of the picnic, pray? The chickens or the strawberries-and-cream?"

"I've not the faintest recollection what I ate," replied the young man, half indignantly. "And now I come to think of it, we never had that dance of which we spoke."

"Were we engaged for a dance?" asked Naomi, glancing at him out of the corners of her eyes. "If I remember right, you laid the burden of asking upon me—which was a horribly rude thing to do—and then disappeared before the dancing had well begun."

"Well, you may congratulate yourself upon your escape, then; for I never danced in my life," said Tresham. "That is a still worse confession than the other, I suppose?"

"It's one that *I* can't make, at any rate," said Mr. Insight, smiling.

"Indeed?" said Tresham, astonished. "Were you ever a dancing-man?"

"Ay, that I was, in my younger days," replied the minister; "and I fancy I must have a strong spice of the old Adam in me still, for I love to watch dancing even now. There is a grace in rhythmic movement which fascinates me much; it gratifies the eye exactly as the lilt of Anacreontics charms the ear. I have even been tempted to regret," continued old Insight, with a comic twinkle, "that our notions are so different from those in the

time of King David of pious memory, and that dancing no longer holds a place in our religious exercises."

"Well," said Tresham, preparing to attack a mighty wedge of cake, entirely oblivious of his prospective dinner at seven, "I never felt any temptation in that way myself. As regards music, however, I confess myself more susceptible; in fact, I'm now engaged in a thorough reconstruction of the musical portion of our services at the district church. I see no reason why church music shouldn't be both congregational and high class, and I'm putting forth my best energies with that end in view."

"I wish you all success," said the minister, finishing his tea. "Naomi, my child, another cup. You have a capital coadjutor in Mr. Peddles, your organist. Ah! he's a rare fellow," continued the old man, his eyes twinkling with humour. "I never shall forget one night, when a couple of organists were over here from Westhampton, on the occasion of some musical festival or other. They, and the man from St. Bede's, and your man, were all hobnobbing together, and discussing the ins and outs of ecclesiastical instrumentation, when the conversation turned upon those peculiar twirls and rumbles which organists indulge in every now and then with a view to descriptive effect. One of the Westhampton fellows prided himself greatly upon his use of the trumpet-stop in the verse

'With trumpets also and shawms;' the St. Bede's man, on his side, had quite as much to say about the fine effect he produced by his rendering of 'Let the sea make a noise, and all that therein is.' But Peddles wasn't to be outdone. 'I won't deny ye're baith of ye as gran' as ye mak' yerselves oot,' he sputtered in his broadest Scotch, 'but ye shud jest hear me *grin like a dog, and gang roun' aboot the city!*'"

"Excellent!" said Tresham, laughing; "I had no idea he was such a wag." Then, as a humorous sense of incongruity presented itself to his mind, coupled with a desire to draw the old minister out still further, he went on, rather inconsequently—

"Have you ever happened to come across Mr. Fairweather?"

"It is scarcely likely," rejoined Mr. Insight, with a quiet smile. "Who am I, that I should come between the wind and his nobility? No; I have never exchanged a word with the Rector. I went to his church one Ascension Day some years ago, and remember the portentously patronising manner in which he offered what he called 'our humble and haughty thanks' to the Almighty in the General Thanksgiving. But, Naomi, child, what have Mr. Tresham and I done that we are condemned to go without crumpets?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear; I quite forgot all about them," said Naomi, jumping up. "What a pity they're not made ready cooked; I do hate toasting them so."

"Do you?" exclaimed Tresham, forestalling her; "I am so glad, because now I shall toast them for you. That's the way, isn't it?" he continued, plunging a silver fork into one of the cakes. "Now if you'll just let me kneel down here, I'll have them done for you in a trice."

"No, indeed, that is *not* the way," said Naomi, rescuing the silver fork. "What an idea! You must use a toasting fork. There! hold it like that, and take care you don't burn it."

"I promise to eat every one I spoil," said Tresham, kneeling down and sitting uncomfortably upon his heels. Mr. Insight chuckled, and made some good-humoured remark about the Church kneeling at the footstool of Dissent.

"Do you know, Mr. Insight," began Tresham, who by this time was feeling quite at home with the old minister, "I do think it is such a pity, in the interest of the Church, that so many eminent men should continue outside her pale. I am sure the Church has suffered greatly in past ages from her estrangement of so many men of culture, and I think the time is come when all such differences should be healed."

"Ah! I'm afraid that will never be—as regards my own

views at least," replied Mr. Insight, rather amused at the young man's naïveté. "I'm too liberal to make a good Churchman, and should never get on with my bishop, I'm sure."

"But you do like the Church, don't you?" pursued Tresham, impaling a fresh crumpet. "I have met with so many Dissenters who entertained the friendliest feelings towards the Establishment, and who were only prevented from entering because of its connection with the State."

"Why, no," replied the minister. "I do *not* like the Church. I object to it on principle, and take exception to much of its practice. But that does not prevent me from loving many Churchmen," he added, with his characteristic twinkle, "on the same grounds on which we often hate the sin but love the sinner. I'm afraid I'm a hopeless case!"

"I wish you wouldn't talk theology while you're toasting crumpets, Mr. Tresham," said Naomi. "Just see how you've burnt that edge; you're as bad as King Alfred, every bit. Why, who can that be, I wonder?" —as the front-door-bell sounded through the little house. "I declare if it isn't that man Rabbits. Whatever brings him here now?"

"I will go and see him," said Mr. Insight, rising; but not before the deacon had caught a glimpse of the

"church-clergyman" toasting crumpets at the fire. "Good evening, Mr. Rabbits; come into my study." And so he disappeared.

"There, now!" exclaimed Naomi, as she and Tresham began to devour the cakes in company; "that's how it always is. The place is always teeming with poulterers and greengrocers, come to worry him about pew-rents, charity-sermons, and all kinds of disagreeable things. It's all because he's a Dissenter. I'm sure they wouldn't dare take such liberties if he were in the Church."

"Wouldn't they?" smiled Tresham. "I'm not so sure of that. Deacons may be tiresome, but for a good healthy despot, commend me to a rich churchwarden. A clergyman is often helpless in his hands."

"Yes, I fancy it requires a good strong clergywoman to tackle people of that sort," returned Naomi, shrewdly. "That's where a clergyman's wife should come to his help. I remember when I was in school at Frankfort, there was a poor little chaplain who was terribly bullied by some man or other—a trustee, I think he was: he used to carry round the plate when there was a collection; but at last the chaplain's wife appeared upon the scene, and there was a regular pitched battle between the two. The trustee-man came off second best, and from that time the chaplain always left the fighting to his wife."

Tresham wondered what a pitched battle would be like between Naomi and Mr. Pound, and whether such an event would ever come about. For some moments he was silent; then, looking up, he said abruptly—

"Are you happy here?"

"Happy?" repeated Naomi, rather startled; "no—at least, of course I'm not unhappy. But I'm dull—bored. I only arrived a fortnight ago, but the prospect of such a life as this is not altogether pleasant. I don't know how I shall be able to stand it. I feel sometimes as though I must run away and turn gipsy; the monotony of this place is awful."

"Oh, come; you mustn't say that," said Tresham. "You've not been here long yet, you know, and you'll find plenty of enjoyment when you come to know people. Believe me, happiness depends far more upon people than upon places. I could live down in a coal-mine, I think, with anybody I really—cared for. And find it Paradise!" he finished, almost tremulously.

"Ah! of that I know nothing," said Naomi, toying with her spoon.

"But you will some day," said Tresham.

"Perhaps," said Naomi, her black lashes almost lying on her cheeks.

A long pause.

"Don't you believe in happiness of that sort?" said Tresham at last, feeling something in his throat that impeded his utterance.

"I suppose I do," replied Naomi, in a low tone. "But I know nothing of it myself."

"Nor I," said Tresham; "but it may be in store for both of us." Then he rose, and stood with his elbow leaning on the mantelpiece. "Don't give up Heathercombe in despair. I was never miserable here, it is true, but neither did I know what true happiness might mean when I first arrived. But now——"

The sharp turning of a handle and sudden opening of Mr. Insight's study door brought Tresham back with a shock to the realities of common life. "All right, all right; I'll give it out next Sunday," said the voice of Mr. Insight in the passage. "Good evening to you;" and then the front door banged, and the minister entered the little room.

"Crumpets?" said he cheerily. "Come, that's well. I really was afraid good Mr. Rabbits was going to keep me an hour, and it required no little exercise of diplomacy on my part to convince him that he had no more to say."

"What did the man want this time?" asked Naomi.

"Nothing of much interest to you, my dear, I am afraid," replied Mr. Insight. "It seems that we are to have a Missionary Sunday, when sermons will be preached in all

the places of worship, and prayers offered for the success of evangelistic enterprise among the heathen. It's not a bad idea, and I shall do my share of work as far as our chapel is concerned."

"I hate the heathen," said Naomi, ungraciously.

"All the more reason you should take an interest in their conversion," said Tresham, smiling. Mr. Insight was looking rather grave and uncomfortable, and the young man felt anxious to smooth things over. "Heathenism is a most objectionable institution, and that is why I mean to second all efforts, to the best of my small power, to replace it by something better."

"Good, good—I like to hear you say that," remarked the elder man, approvingly. "It's the fashion now-a-days to rather run down missionaries, and, in all frankness, much as I deplore it, I am not surprised at the reaction. Many of the missionary reports that are given to the public are, I have strong reason to believe, egregiously over-coloured, besides being disfigured by much foolish cant. Many of the men who are sent out belong to the wrong class; they are frequently illiterate and conceited persons, who might do very well as teachers in a ragged-school, but are ludicrously unfitted for serious work among cultured peoples like the Hindoos or Chinese. Mission-work *per se* has my cordial sympathy; I can conceive no grander, no worthier

enterprise for an educated Christian man. But hitherto we Dissenters, at any rate, have been going altogether on the wrong tack. We have too often confided the tremendous responsibility of introducing and representing Christianity among shrewd and lettered men to a set of persons who, however well-intentioned, are in many instances greatly inferior, in point of intellectual culture, to those they presume to teach; and who disgust their hearers by profaning all they hold most sacred, instead of recognising the good that exists in every religious system in the world, and building their instructions upon it. I shouldn't wonder if I were led to follow out that train of thought in my sermon; and, oh dear, down will come the Philistines upon me if I yield to the temptation!"

To these remarks Tresham gave a qualified and somewhat hesitating assent; and in the discussion which followed contrived, with no small tact, to draw such observations and replies from Naomi as tended to counteract the disagreeable impression produced upon her father by her former speech, and to exhibit her in the fair light through which his own now thoroughly distorted vision saw her. The trio conversed happily and unflaggingly for a considerable time, when suddenly a clock struck. Tresham started up.

"What time was that?" he said, in haste.

"A quarter past seven," said the minister, pulling out his watch.

"A quarter past seven!" exclaimed Tresham, horror-struck. "I must be off at once. I am engaged to dine with Ricochet at seven—whatever shall I do? Good-bye—good-bye."

"I'll open the door for you," said Mr. Insight, going out before him. "You'd never unfasten that lock. It requires to be pulled two different ways at once."

"Oh, my cane!" cried Tresham, darting back into the room. He had brought no cane. The next moment he was standing close to Naomi, her hand between both his, gazing down into the dark depths of her black eyes.

"I may come again?" he uttered under his breath.

"Yes—come," said Naomi.

"Good-bye," he almost whispered. He allowed his gaze to rest upon her for just one second after uttering that word, then dropped her hand and vanished.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE POISON IN THE VEINS.

Not more swiftly did Tresham fly along the streets to the fulfilment of his forgotten engagement than did all the good resolutions he had formed in the morning fly away from Tresham. The spell which now bound him filled his whole being with a sort of insane happiness, different from anything he had before experienced; imbecile smiles diffused themselves over his face, and his eyes shone with the baneful joy of the lunatic. The poison was in his veins; it was fast mounting to his brain, and would soon bring him to the abject condition of that slave of slaves—a man over head and ears in love.

"Do you call this seven o'clock?" said the cheery voice of Eric, as the breathless parson entered the dining-room of his host. "Why it's twenty minutes to eight! What have you been doing? Come, give an account of yourself."

"Better late than never," said Ricochet, smiling. "We were thinking of having the river dragged for you. But now you're here, let's sit down."

"I ask a thousand pardons," said Tresham, "but really I had no idea it was so late. I couldn't get here before."

"Now just listen how he contradicts himself," said Eric, as they began their soup. "He first says he didn't know it was so late, and then that he was detained—which implies that something prevented him from coming. Why couldn't you get here before, you unconscionable fellow?"

"My dear Eric, you ought to know that a clergyman is never wholly master of his own time," said Tresham, with an uneasy blush. The moral perceptions already vitiated, you perceive.

"Oh come, that's all gammon," was Eric's blunt reply. "Why, what's taken away your appetite?" as Tresham sent away his soup unfinished and declined fish. "You haven't had your dinner already, have you?"

"If you're so anxious to know what I've been doing," said Tresham, desperately, "I'm sure you're welcome to the information. I've been having tea at Mr. Insight's."

"Having tea at Mr. Insight's!" exclaimed young Charteris, dropping his knife and fork. "Oh, you abandoned old hypocrite! Now hold your tongue; I *will* expose you. Just listen to this, Ricochet. I met this man this morning, and wanted him to come and call upon the Insights with me in the afternoon. 'Not I, indeed,' says his reverence; 'I'm not going to help you in your amours.'

Amours, mind you! And the scamp was intending the whole time to go and have it all to himself this evening. Well, Tresham, I thought better of you. You sly old rascal! But that's the way with all you virtuous people. Never mind; I shall know how to take you another time."

"What a ridiculous animal you are!" said Tresham, amid a peal of good-humoured laughter from Captain Ricochet. "I never had any intention of the sort. I happened to meet Mr. Insight by the purest chance, and he asked me in to have a cup of tea. There was no reason to refuse, and so in I went. There's nothing very strange in that, is there?"

"I hope the fair Naomi was fascinating," smiled Ricochet. "How did she entertain you?"

"By pouring out the tea, to the best of my recollection," said Tresham, carelessly.

"What a charming tableau!" pursued Eric, in his bantering tone. "Quite a new edition of Mr. Lillyvick and Miss Petowker. 'Look at her, now that she moves to put the kettle on. There! Isn't it fascination, Sir?'"

"You have a good memory," said Tresham, drily.

"I say, Tresham, look at your sleeve," said Ricochet. "Where did you get that great grease-spot from?"

"Grease-spot?" echoed Tresham, examining his arm.

"What a nuisance, to be sure! I never saw it till this moment."

"Come, come, old man, you'd better make a clean breast of it," said Eric. "What have you been doing?"

"Toasting crumpets," acknowledged Tresham. "I suppose some of the hot butter must have dropped upon my coat, and there's an end of the mystery."

"Well, I *should* like to have seen you, most uncommonly," said Eric. "Of all men in this world! But don't you fret yourself. I shall cut you out yet. I dare say you get on pretty well with the old man, because you can talk theology like a book; but I flatter myself I've a better chance than you with the young lady. I tell you, I'm just nuts upon her. Let's go and call to-morrow afternoon, Ricochet?"

"I'm not so sure that I share your admiration for this Miss Insight," observed Ricochet, more seriously. "She doesn't strike me pleasantly at all. She isn't pretty; and there's an expression in her face every now and then which, if it doesn't make her absolutely ugly, repels me in spite of myself. What do you think of her, Tresham?"

Now between Eric's merciless banter and Ricochet's graver criticism, the conversation was becoming just as hot for Tresham as was pleasant. The worst of it was that he could not help acknowledging that there was some

show of truth in what Ricochet remarked, and the reflection caused him a sharp twinge of pain. He replied, with some restraint, that Mr. Insight seemed very fond of his daughter, and he had no reason to suppose that she was other than a good daughter to him. Ricochet shook his head.

"I'm inclined to doubt it," he said. "I once or twice saw her yesterday speak to her father in a sulky, disrespectful way that I didn't like at all. One moment she's all charm and sweetness; the next, she looks a regular little fiend. I don't believe she's true."

"My dear Ricochet, I must say I think you're most uncharitable," protested Tresham. "You've only seen her once, and it's impossible to judge of anybody on so short an acquaintance."

"Very likely I am uncharitable," replied Ricochet, with perfect candour. "I would far rather be uncharitable, and find myself mistaken, than that my opinion should prove correct. I dare say I'm quite wrong; I hope I am. But I'm afraid that first impressions in the present case are true ones."

"The parson will go for you if you don't look out, Ricochet," laughed Eric.

"No, he won't," said Ricochet; "he's a great deal too sensible, I take it. Besides, what's the odds? It's only a matter of opinion."

"Prejudice," corrected Tresham.

"Well, I'll acknowledge that I *am* rather prejudiced against the girl," conceded the Captain, wiping his moustache. "And I'll tell you how and why. I fancy that I know rather more about her than either of you do, and what I think I know is not altogether to her credit."

"What do you mean?" asked Tresham, with white lips. Even Eric looked up inquiringly.

"You know she's just returned from a school at Frankfort," resumed Ricochet. "But do you know why she left?"

"Her father wanted her — her time was up," said Tresham.

"Her father may have wanted her, but that was not the reason she came home," returned Ricochet; "and her time was *not* up, either. But let me tell the story from the beginning. I have a brother officer in Frankfort, a man I knew in the Punjaub, and who very often lets me hear from him. A fortnight or three weeks ago he sent me a long account of some row or scandal there had been at a school kept by a Fräulein Plänckner, in which a young English lady was said to have been mixed up. This girl, whoever she may have been, was, he thought, a sort of parlour-boarder; and she was discovered carrying on a clandestine correspondence with some fellow or

other who ought to have known better. The schoolmistress, a very prim sort of person, was furious; but the young lady showed such signs of contrition, and turned on the waterworks to such good purpose, that the worthy soul was molliñed, and took her into favour again. Everything went on smoothly for some time, until one evening one of the younger children was missed. Search was made for her high and low; everybody was questioned, including the parlour-boarder, but no one knew anything at all about her. Suddenly, about ten o'clock, when the schoolmistress was half frantic with apprehension, the child was seen stealing into the house by a back way, and gliding up the servants' staircase to her bedroom. '*Gott sei dank!*' ejaculated Fräulein Plänckner, '*das Kind ist ja gefunden.*' Then came the investigation and the inevitable *exposé*. The unfortunate child had been forced, by frightful threats on the part of the parlour-boarder, to act as her go-between, and carry communications from her to her lover. It was a terrible tale of tyranny that came to light—a strong remorseless nature acting without mercy upon a timid, feeble one, and impelling obedience in things which the unhappy victim knew were dangerous and wicked. The old Fräulein acted like a brick. She forgave the child, who, indeed, had had punishment enough, and *expelled* the parlour-boarder."

"And what has all that to do with Miss Insight?" cried Tresham, as Ricochet concluded.

"I *hope*, nothing; I *fear*, much," replied the Captain.

"It's impossible; it's quite absurd!" exclaimed Tresham, with excitement. "In the first place, Miss Insight was not a parlour-boarder at any school; she was a pupil-teacher. Secondly, we are not informed that she was at this Fräulein Plänckner's at all. Thirdly——"

"Thirdly and in conclusion, my beloved brethren," interrupted Eric, "I vote you bring out a bottle of your Larose, old man. This is dreadful dry talk, and Tresham and I neither of us believe in your theory a bit. It's all a yarn, depend upon it; there's probably no such person as Fräulein What's-her-name in the whole of Frankfort."

"I quite admit all your objections," continued Captain Ricochet, in conversation with Tresham. "It's quite true that Miss Insight was a pupil-teacher, whereas the heroine of my friend's romance was said to be a parlour-boarder. But, on the other hand, the mistake is just the kind that a man who knows nothing about girls' schools would most likely make. Whether or not Miss Insight was ever at Fräulein Plänckner's might easily be discovered. These two points cleared up, the truth would immediately come to light. It is very possible that the whole story refers to somebody else altogether, and not to the fair Naomi at

all. I don't press my opinions upon any one. They are as likely to be wrong as right."

"What a little devil she must be!" grinned Eric. "I don't quite like that about making a cat's-paw of the small girl, though. That was too bad. But a clandestine correspondence—pooh! Why, every schoolgirl does it. By Jove, I wish she'd start a clandestine correspondence with me. What a lark—eh, Tresham? Or would you forbid the banns?"

But Tresham was shut up for that time. He sat, thoughtful and frowning, biting his lips and yet endeavouring to appear unconcerned. His stake in the truth or falsehood of this horrid story was immense. Whether Naomi was pure and good or false and bad, he loved her. There was no getting over that great fact. For weal or woe he was hers—hers to bless or to curse, to play with, torture, or rejoice, according to her will. Then came a pang of sharp, wild jealousy of the man with whom she had carried on the alleged clandestine relationship. Did she still hold communication with him? Was she in love with him, or had she simply been amusing herself at his expense? In either case it would be bad enough. To know her good—to win her love—to pass a lifetime in her sweet companionship—ah! could this ever be? His happiness for life now hung upon this girl. It was no longer

his; he was no longer his own. Oh, cursed thrall that binds a good man's heart, that paralyses his energies, that deprives him of his highest, noblest, best prerogative—his independence—and makes him grovel on the earth from which he sprang, a plaything in a foolish woman's hands!

"By the way," said Ricochet, by way of turning the conversation, "how was it your friend Giraldi was not at the garden-party yesterday?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Tresham, absently. "Oh yes, I do, though,—he was laid up with a cold or something. I know he was invited."

"I can't think what you see in Giraldi," observed Eric, with his mouth full of pudding. "He seems to me an awful little duffer—dreaming and mooning his time away over prayer-books, missals, plaster-of-paris, and all sorts of rot. Why doesn't he go in for cricket, or racquets, or something sensible of that kind?"

"It's no use a fellow's forcing himself to cultivate tastes he doesn't possess," observed Ricochet. "Now I rather like that little fellow; there's something so fresh and natural about him. You know him very well, don't you, Tresham?"

"Yes, I do," said Tresham, rousing himself with an effort. "I quite agree with you; I like him extremely. He's different from the general run of fellows, but I don't think the worse of him for that."

"Well, I think he's a damned little muff," said Eric. "Beg pardon, Tresham; the word slipped out of itself."

"Don't apologise to me," said Tresham, with a half-smile. Eric coloured. Ricochet uncorked a bottle of Larose, and, filling both their glasses, said carelessly—

"Muff or not, he'll be most sinfully rich some day."

"What's the figure?" inquired Eric.

"Seven thousand a year," replied Ricochet, "plus accumulations till he's of age, which won't be, under the will, till he's five-and-twenty."

"Of course the priests will manage to get a good slice out of it," said Eric. "I wonder you don't set about making a 'vert of him, Tresham; think what a prize he'd be!"

"I haven't the slightest intention of doing anything of the kind," replied the parson.

"Why not?" asked Eric. "I thought that would be quite in your line, now. You might save his soul and his money at one shot."

"Don't be absurd," said Tresham. "He's very well as he is, I dare say; there are plenty of people in the place who want looking after much more than he does."

Cigars were now lighted up, and the conversation turned upon the contemplated improvements in the musical portion of the church services. Tresham gave Ricochet an account of his interview with the schoolmaster in the morn-

ing, and told him of the expected reinforcement of boys' voices from the Church schools. Those in favour of the reforms were known to be in a large majority; the disaffected were few and insignificant. The only man of any weight on the opposition side was Mr. Pound, and he would be entirely overborne by numbers. The discussion of these matters did something towards diverting Tresham's thoughts from the subject that was preying on his mind, and he threw himself into the conversation eagerly. At last, finding that Ricochet and Eric were beginning to turn their thoughts in the direction of the billiard-room, Tresham gladly availed himself of the fact to take his departure. He walked slowly down the moonlit streets, thoughtfully puffing a cheroot. The shock occasioned by the disagreeable story once over, he veered round to the conviction that it was all a gross exaggeration. Schoolgirls were always doing foolish things, for which it would be absurd to blame them seriously. If all the faults and follies of a woman's girlhood were to be raked up and marshalled in array against her after she had arrived at years of discretion, who in the wide world would be found altogether blameless? After all, indiscretions are not crimes. Naomi was evidently a strong-willed, impetuous girl, full of generous impulses, and easily led—led by love, but not coerced by fear. Were it ever his lot to lead her,

he would at any rate have love enough; love strong to shield her from danger, to guard her against temptation, to mould her untutored soul, and to sacrifice itself even, if need were, for her happiness, her safety, and her good. And he was not without hopes that she might be brought to care for him. He would follow up the slight advantage he thought he had gained that day. She had so far confided in him as to acknowledge that she was not happy; more,—she had listened meekly to his counsels, had confessed she had hitherto not known what true joy was, and had told him to come again. He would go again; he would win her confidence; then he might win her love. Alas! it was only a few weeks before that he had shocked the Rector by condemning such love as he now felt as dreams and moonshine, little recking of the stern retribution that was in store for him. But the gods may not be blasphemed with impunity. The curse had fallen upon him at last.

CHAPTER IX.

FATHER ALOYSIUS.

St. Gertrude's Oratory was a fine Gothic structure, built of grey stone, standing about a mile from the confines of the town in the middle of a pleasant grove. The establishment consisted of a handsome chapel, an infirmary, a school, and quarters for the priests and their assistants. It was a modern foundation, having been endowed some twenty years before by a wealthy Catholic gentleman in fulfilment of a vow taken under the pressure of severe domestic anxiety; and since then, having been made over to certain members of the Society of Jesus, had flourished greatly under their masterly administration. The Superior, at the time of which we write, was that Father Aloysius who was regarded with such intense mistrust and jealousy by the Protestant clergymen of the parish; the labours of the Order in Heathercombe being directed principally to the reclamation of vagabonds, the protection of orphans, the relief of the poor, and the consolation of the sick. Education was afforded for a nominal sum to the children

of any poor parents who chose to send them to the school; instruction was given in carpentering, painting, joining, printing, and other useful trades, in order that the boys might have the means of earning an honest livelihood when at a proper age; and an extensive system of visiting among the sick and indigent of the surrounding peasantry was regularly carried on. The difficulties and discouragements incurred by these devoted men were numerous and great, for there is nothing the typical English countryman so instinctively dreads as Popery. If slander, ingratitude, and brickbats had not driven the Jesuits from Heathercombe in despair, it was not because any of those indications of social protest had been lacking. The Rector, sipping brown sherry in his cosy library, heard with bitter anger of the inroads made upon his parish by the Fathers, who were to be met in all weathers and at all hours tramping indefatigably through the lowest slums, the medicine-chest in one hand, the missal in the other. Then it was that he had called the Father Superior a hydra; and when it became known that the Rector had called the Superior a hydra, everybody else called him a hydra too. The only minister in Heathercombe who abstained from indulging in a luxury thus consecrated by so high an example was the Independent parson; he, on the contrary, not only boldly confessed

his admiration for the Jesuit and his colleagues, but vowed upon the platform that they put all the Protestants to shame. Mr. Insight had even gone so far as to pay a visit to St. Gertrude's, and to express his cordial approbation of the charitable works there carried on, as well as his sympathy with the self-denying labours of the priests; and although the Superior excused himself from returning Mr. Insight's visit on the plea that he never went into society upon any pretext whatever, the two parted with mutual expressions of good-will.

It was here, too, that Giraldi lived. Father Aloysius had been the confessor of his mother; and his guardian, Sir Jupiter, only fulfilled her dying wish in arranging for the youth to lodge in his tutor's house. Giraldi's rooms were at the extreme end of the building occupied by the priests, and near a small side-door in the garden-wall, so that he could go in and out unperceived. Here he studied divinity, Church history, Latin, mathematics, and sculpture; attending all the offices of the Church, and going regularly to confession four times a year. A bright, active-minded lad, he never seemed dull in spite of the little society he enjoyed; for when not engaged in his more serious pursuits, he found an unfailing source of entertainment in his pencil, and would often spend hours at a time strolling about the Craigie Hills, crayon and

sketch-book in hand. It was not altogether so unhealthy a life as Sir Jupiter had imagined; Giraldi had no leanings towards monasticism, possessing far too keen a relish for both art and nature to embrace a career which offered so few opportunities for the cultivation of either. At the same time, the influence of his confessor was undoubtedly very strong, and the boy was growing about as narrow-minded and bigoted as it was possible for him to become.

It was on a balmy and delicious afternoon a few days after the events last recorded, that Giraldi was sitting in his room surrounded by his books and drawings. Over the mantelpiece hung an ivory crucifix, in curious proximity to which was placed a cast of Canova's exquisite Cupid and Psyche in plaster-of-paris. A large drawing-easel occupied a position near one of the windows, which was flanked on the other side by a small chamber-organ; a writing-table covered with litter of every description stood in the middle of the floor, and a well-filled bookcase opposite the now empty grate. Giraldi was hovering desultorily about from one part of the large room to another, now stopping to touch up a crayon sketch upon the easel, now polishing his compasses, and ever and anon sitting down and striking a few harmonious chords upon the organ — an instrument which possessed a singularly sweet, rich tone. The lad was no great musical genius,

and had never studied; but he had a delicate ear, and his taste had been finely trained in the churches of Rome and Florence. He had just fallen into a reverie over a reminiscence of Bach's First Prelude, which he played with tolerable correctness from memory, when a rap came at his door. He immediately jumped up from the instrument, and uttered an exclamation of joyful surprise as his eye fell upon the advancing figure and pleasant face of Tresham.

"Oh, I'm so delighted you've come," he cried, in his ringing, childish voice. "You promised me ever so long ago, you know; the very first time we met. And I haven't seen you for an age. How are you?"

"I know I've been very remiss," said Tresham, throwing himself into a low chair with rather a weary smile. "But you must make allowances. I've very little time to spare. What a charming place you have here! and what an amount of work you must be able to get through!"

"Work?" repeated Giraldi, laughing; "well, yes, I suppose I do work, though in rather a desultory fashion, I'm afraid. But what will you have? You look awfully hot and tired."

"A cup of coffee, please," said Tresham. Giraldi rang the bell and gave the necessary order. Tresham lighted a cigar, and cast his eyes round the apartment with some curiosity. Then he said—

"I was sorry not to meet you at the Duchess's the other day. We had a most delightful afternoon."

"So I heard," replied Giraldi. "I was laid up with a bad throat, and couldn't go. But you do like the Duchess, don't you? Isn't she a dear old curiosity?"

"She is—to the very letter," assented Tresham, with a laugh. "There's something amazingly refreshing in her unconventional ways, though one always feels a little apprehensive about what she may take it into her head to say or do next. I like the Duke, too; a sterling old fellow, I should say."

"And who were there?" inquired Giraldi. "Do tell me all about it."

"All the world and his wife," replied the other. "There was Lady Sharp, like an accusing angel in black bombazine; Miss Ashe, laying violent siege to the Duke of Grandchester, and not so successful as she deserved to be; Lady Gloatover, a disagreeable old woman from Castle Sudds, who kept on saying the rudest things I ever heard in my life; a charming person named Lady Turquoise, who was as handsome and agreeable as the other was objectionable and ugly; and a host of others, whose names I can't remember at this moment."

"What young ladies?" pursued Giraldi.

"Oh, Miss Heath—Miss Charteris—Miss Ashe—Miss

Smith—Miss Jones—Miss Brown—and I believe Miss Robinson. But I can't swear to Miss Robinson."

"No other that you *can* swear to?" asked Giraldi.

"Ah! yes, there was," said Tresham, pushed into a corner. "Miss Insight. But I suppose you don't know the Insights."

"Oh," said the lad, in rather an undertone. "Yes, I dare say it was uncommonly delightful. And what is the Duke of Grandchester like? He's awfully grand, isn't he?"

"Quite too consummately quite," returned Tresham with a laugh. "How he ever manages to breathe the common air like other people I can't imagine. It must have been a very bitter pill for him to go; but it was unavoidable, I fancy. There's a report abroad that he's actually going to have a reception at the Castle soon, and that everybody with any pretensions to gentility will be commanded to attend."

"Really?" said Giraldi. "What fun it will be! And what a lot of fumigating the Castle will require afterwards. He certainly is a very ridiculous old man."

"Play something," said Tresham, sipping his coffee.

Giraldi immediately seated himself at the organ, and, with an exquisite touch, began 'Ave Verum.' He played it through twice over; then, as the last chords died away, he sprang up and said, briskly—

"Now let me show you some of my drawings; and then you'll come and see Father Aloysius, won't you?"

"With great pleasure," answered Tresham, rising. Giraldi brought out a large portfolio full of sketches, and, clearing a space upon the table, turned them over one by one. There were some pretty landscapes in water-colours, taken from the surrounding country; an excellent view of St. Gertrude's; a highly finished little painting of the interior of the chapel, with a fine effect of light streaming over the altar through the stained-glass windows of the transept; a few studies of statuary, and an incredible number of most ludicrous caricatures.

"Oh, you really mustn't look at those," laughed Giraldi, making a feint of snatching them away from Tresham. "I'm horribly ashamed of them; but somehow I can't help caricaturing some people. Well, if you'll promise not to tell anybody, you shall see them. Do you recognise this?"

"Splendid!" cried Tresham, with an irrepressible burst of merriment. "Lady Sharp to the very life! I've seen her look just like that. And there's the gleeful grin of poor Miss Ashe! She doesn't squint quite so badly as that, though. But it's a capital portrait. You've a wonderful knack of hitting off likenesses, and yet making them absurd."

"Now look at this one," said Giraldi, selecting a sketch. It represented a lumbering open carriage, in which sat, bolt upright, the towering form of an enormous lady wrapped in a dazzling scarlet shawl, while by her side crouched a

dried-up elderly gentleman, with a much-puckered face, and broad-brimmed hat placed on the back of his head, which barely reached to the top of the enormous lady's shoulder. The portraits were unmistakable.

"That's the best of the whole lot," exclaimed Tresham, in genuine admiration. "It's really admirable. I'd ask you to give me one of these, only I could never rely upon myself not to show it to somebody else, and then we might look out for squalls."

"I've got a plaster cast somewhere that I finished the other day," said Giraldi, moving towards the other end of the room. "It's somewhere in this closet, I think; I shall find it immediately." Tresham in the meantime took up another portfolio which was lying rather out of sight behind an ottoman, and began to turn over the drawings it contained. Suddenly he came upon a face the sight of which sent a pang through his whole frame. It was scarcely a portrait; ostensibly, at any rate, it represented some saint in an attitude of prayer; but there was no ignoring the marvellous resemblance it bore to a not very saint-like face in Heathercombe. Tresham stared at it as though transfixed.

"Who's this?" he called out, in a constrained voice.

"Which?" said Giraldi, returning. "Oh, they're only studies in that portfolio. I did them when I was in Germany. There's nothing there that will interest you."

"Studies from nature?" inquired Tresham, keenly.

"Some are from nature and some from copies," replied Giraldi, tying the strings. "I can't lay my hand on that cast just now. Let us go in and see Father Aloysius."

"But was that picture I was looking at just now from nature?" persisted Tresham.

"That? Oh, that was a fancy sketch of St. Elizabeth," returned Giraldi. "This way, please; along that corridor. Here's the door."

He knocked and entered. Tresham found himself in a large, square room, with bare stone walls and no carpet. Its furniture consisted of a small camp-bedstead, a good-sized but very common table, a few plain deal chairs, and an enormous bookshelf. At the table sat a rather tall, pale, elderly man, dressed in a worn black cassock, and engaged busily in writing. The expression of his face in repose was somewhat cold and stern; but as he rose to receive his visitor a smile of peculiar sweetness played upon his lips.

"Here is Mr. Tresham, Father," announced Giraldi, "of whom I have spoken to you.—This is Father Aloysius."

"I am happy to see you, Mr. Tresham," said the priest, in a clear, melodious voice. "As our friend here says, he has often spoken of you to me, and it is kind of you to pay me this visit."

"The privilege is wholly mine," returned Tresham, feel-

ing less at his ease in the presence of this austere-looking man than he had ever been while calling upon any of his Protestant colleagues. "I have always felt much interested in what I have heard about St. Gertrude's, and am glad of an opportunity to visit it in person."

"Surmising that a certain individual can scarcely be quite so black as he is painted, I suppose," observed Father Aloysius, as a sarcastic but not unpleasant smile flashed across his face. Then, as the smile passed away, he said, "But let that rest. Here we neither ask nor care what is said of us outside. The great thing is to know one's work and do it, irrespective of all other considerations. You have not been over the Oratory yet?"

"No," replied Tresham; "but I hope to, with your permission."

"Most certainly," said the priest, courteously. "I believe that you are a Protestant minister; and the second, only, to whom I shall have had the pleasure of doing the honours of St. Gertrude's."

"Indeed?" responded Tresham; "may I ask who the first was? Not the Rector, surely!"

"No," said the Father; "it was a Mr. Insight. Do you remember him, Giraldi?"

"I don't think I was in when he called," replied Giraldi.

"Possibly not," said the Father, indifferently. "I was

rather favourably impressed with him; he seemed a candid and agreeable man."

"That is quite true," assented Tresham; "he inspires me with genuine respect. I am glad he has been here; our impressions will no doubt afford another link of sympathy between us."

"So, so," murmured Father Aloysius, with a slight smile. "I infer from that that you do not altogether sympathise with those of your co-religionists who raise the hue-and-cry at us every now and then?"

"I regard all such demonstrations with disgust," said Tresham. "I am a thorough Protestant; but my Protestantism does not teach me to distrust and vilify better men than myself because they hold different views of truth from me. Sincerity, in my opinion, is the real and only gauge of a man's religious worth."

"Your liberality and frankness alike do you honour," replied the Father, cautiously; "though of course you cannot expect me to agree with your concluding sentence. We Catholics, who believe in authority—who bow before one infallible standard of truth—are not permitted to condone any deviation from that standard, even on so plausible a plea as sincerity."

"Then in your judgment," replied Tresham, "it is better to force oneself to accept a dogma at which one's intellect

rebels than to adopt a creed which, however possibly erroneous, one is able to hold sincerely?"

"Undoubtedly," rejoined the Superior. "And the reason is plain. We are called upon to present not only our bodies, but our entire being, as a sacrifice to God; and that includes the heart, the will, and the intellect. The harder the struggle, the nobler the victory and the worthier the offering. The consecration of one's physical frame to the cause of truth is, after all, a purely mechanical action; it involves merely a change of place or a system of external discipline. The body is neither the most precious nor the worthiest part of man; it is a mere instrument, and, being such, is of inferior importance, as a sacrifice, to the intellect, which is the great stronghold of man's pride. That is why the Church, in her heavenly wisdom, denies the right of private judgment to her children, who, as babes in Christ, must be content to obey His representative on earth without meddling in controversies and asking the why and the wherefore of what she is pleased to ordain."

"It seems to me that that involves a contradiction in terms," remarked Tresham. "The very resolution to bow before authority implies a previous conviction that the authority is true; and it is impossible to arrive at that or any other conviction without exercising private judgment. How, for instance, is a Protestant to become a Roman Catholic

unless his private judgment convinces him that Catholicism is true? A man cannot perform the simplest action in life without first exercising his free-will, based upon the judgment that it will be better for him to act than to abstain; and if this holds good in purely physical phenomena, how much more in cases where the intellect comes into play? You, as a Catholic, bow to authority. Why? Because your private judgment tells you it is right to do so. You exercise your private judgment in being a Catholic, precisely as I do in being a Protestant. The dilemma, to my mind, is complete."

"Excuse me one moment, Mr. Tresham," said the Superior, the slightest possible shade of embarrassment passing over his brow. "Giraldi, will you oblige me by seeing if the chapel is open? I think you said that Mr. Tresham expressed a desire to see the altar-piece."

Giraldi at once left the room. Tresham wondered for a moment, and then became conscious of an almost irresistible inclination to smile. Certainly Father Aloysius was very careful of his pupil's orthodoxy. But why send him out of hearing of the priest's reply?

"I think, Mr. Tresham, that you rather overstate the case," he said, gently. "The Church does not absolutely forbid the exercise of private judgment in all cases; witness those points on which she refrains from dogmatising, and

leaves us free to form what impressions we choose. But she does most emphatically forbid us to set up our private judgment in opposition to her teaching in cases where that teaching is authoritative. The sin is not in exercising private judgment *per se*, but in refusing to waive it before the utterances of inspiration."

"But how are we to become convinced that such utterances are inspired, unless we exercise our judgment in the matter?" argued Tresham. "You seem to take for granted the very thing that has to be proved. Supposing, for instance, that a man wishes to convert me to Catholicism; to what does he appeal? To my intellect; to my reason. There is no other channel open. My intellect being convinced, I form my judgment accordingly, and I am brought to acknowledge the authority of the Church. But I cannot acknowledge the truth of that or any other proposition without exercising the reasoning powers with which I have been endowed."

"God," replied the Father, solemnly, "would never have demanded our belief in revelation had the evidences for that revelation not been such as to render disbelief a sin. Refusal to accept the oracles of God, as confided to the One True Church, implies, in the Church's view, a *perversion* of the judgment. We cannot probe the subject deeper. Whatever may be the Protestant's opinion or claim as to his

right of private judgment in such matters, he will have to answer for it to God."

This, Tresham thought, brought the discussion to a close; for it was clear that no more satisfactory rejoinder to his objection was to be obtained. He was, therefore, relieved when the door opened and admitted Giraldi, who announced that the chapel was open, and that Father Joseph was practising at the organ. Tresham had often heard of the great musical talents of this priest, who officiated as organist at the chapel services, and expressed much pleasure at the prospect of the treat that awaited him. The Superior immediately invited his attendance, and ushered him across a shady quadrangle towards the beautiful little Gothic edifice, through whose half-open windows came pealing strains of what sounded to him like almost heavenly music. It was a still, warm, golden afternoon; a few drowsy bees hummed slumbrously among the flowers, and there was an air of solemnity and repose about the whole scene which appealed vividly to the young man's imagination. He fell into a silent, thoughtful mood, wondering a little vaguely how far it would be possible, amid such surroundings, for a man to school himself into an absolutely passive and receptive frame of mind; to resist all rebelliousness of the intellect; to give himself over entirely to the guardianship of an actual, visible Church, and so eventually to find spiritual

and intellectual peace. Had not the experiment been tried before, and found successful in numberless instances? Did the world owe nothing to the monasteries of the Middle Ages? And might it not, after all, be better for the world if there were more to pray, like Moses, Aaron, and Hur, on the top of Horeb, while the mass of humanity were keeping up the fight with Amalek below?

They entered the chapel. Father Aloysius, with a rapid movement, knelt before a picture of the Saviour, darting an upward glance at it that, for an instant, seemed to transfigure his face with the pale glory of devotion that may be supposed to irradiate the features of a dying saint. Giraldi gave a sort of bob, and crossed himself. Then the Father rose, and was the courteous host once more. The air was heavy with the perfume of incense, and the sun streamed in gorgeous rays of purple and crimson and orange and green athwart the transept, flooding the altar with rich tints, as of a thousand wonderful rainbows. Father Joseph, unaware that any one was present, continued playing a lovely requiem; the Superior moved noiselessly along the aisle, with Tresham following; while Giraldi fixed his eyes upon the Madonna that formed the altar-piece—less devotion, however, Tresham thought, being discernible in his expression than interest in the painting as a work of art.

"That's the Correggio I told you of," he whispered to

Tresham, nodding towards the picture. "It's very fine, isn't it?"

"No doubt it is, if it's a Correggio," replied Tresham, who, being no judge of art, was too sensible to stultify himself by assuming an opinion. "But I cannot say I admire the conventional conceptions of the Virgin. They always strike me as tame and vacuous to a degree."

"How *can* you say so?" exclaimed Giraldi, in astonishment.

"I am never much impressed by pictures in a church," continued Tresham. "The dim religious light, the solemn Gothic architecture, and such music as we are hearing now, are a service in themselves; indeed, they appeal to me far more strongly than many services one attends. Pictures add nothing to such impressions; they rather disturb me than assist."

Giraldi only raised his eyebrows in surprise. Tresham found a seat in one of the corners, and resigned himself to silent enjoyment of the marvellously beautiful strains that came floating from the organ-loft, flooding the air with melody. The Superior stood motionless at a little distance, apparently lost in thought; then, walking slowly towards the place where Tresham sat, he took a seat beside him, and said, in a quiet undertone—

"Do you never practise confession in your Church?"

"It has been introduced lately by some of the Ritualists, I believe," said Tresham; "but I have never encouraged it myself. The rubric allows a modified form of confession under certain circumstances; it is, however, always left to the person himself to confess or not, and then only with a view to spiritual consolation and advice."

"See, then, how human nature itself vindicates the ordinances of our Church!" exclaimed Father Aloysius, an almost triumphant smile lighting up his face. "Does not every man who knows that he has sinned feel an irresistible impulse to acknowledge it? Is it not a law of our very nature that the consciousness of sin is too heavy a burden to be borne alone?"

"Most certainly," said Tresham. "But, as certainly, no man need or should keep his sin locked up in his own breast. Confession and repentance are the only conditions of forgiveness; and we therefore confess to Him who alone has the power to absolve."

"But how can you know whether you are absolved or not?" inquired the Father.

"Every man can know whether he is truly penitent or not," said Tresham; "and we know that true repentance brings forgiveness with it. The responsibility of pronouncing or withholding absolution would be more than I could

bear. I would not assume such an onus for the world. It would be dreadful to me."

"But no responsibility attaches to the priest," said the Father. "The absolution he pronounces is understood to be purely conditional upon the sincerity of the penitent and the fulness of his confession. If the penitent be wanting on either point, no forgiveness can be his, be the formula of absolution pronounced a thousand times; on the contrary, his sin remains—seven times more heinous than before."

Just at this juncture, Tresham's eye happened to fall upon Giraldi, who had been listening to every word. The lad looked very white, and was tossing his hair uneasily off his forehead with one hand. There was a troubled expression in his face which Tresham had never noticed there previously; a wrinkling of the forehead, a working of the lips, which seemed to tell of either bodily or mental disquietude. But the cessation of their voices roused him, and he moved towards the speakers, saying, with a forced smile—

"What, are you arguing again? You sent me away before, Father; I hope there's nothing I mayn't hear now."

"You don't look well, Giraldi," observed Tresham. "What's made you so pale all of a sudden?"

"I'm all right," said Giraldi. "What makes you think

I'm not? It's only rather warm here, and the incense—— Oh, I feel so faint!"

"Come out into the air," said Tresham, rising quickly and pulling the boy along by his arm. "Why, you're as white as a ghost! There, sit down here in the shade, and let the breeze blow on you a few minutes. You'll be all right directly. Here comes Father Aloysius."

"Is Giraldi ill?" asked the Father, as he came out of the chapel. "He was never taken with faintness before. You had better go and lie down in some cool place, Giraldi. The heat has overpowered you."

"Indeed, I'm perfectly well," protested the lad, rising to his feet with an effort. "I don't want to lie down; it'll do me good to walk about a bit. Aren't you going to take Mr. Tresham over the schools and infirmary, Father?"

"Certainly, if he wishes, and you feel strong enough," returned the Superior. "We have about forty children here, Mr. Tresham, under our protection. Some were vagrants, without home or friends; others have been sent to us by their parents for the sake of schooling, and learning the rudiments of some useful trade. We Jesuits, you know," he added, with a smile, "can turn our hands to most things. Father Joseph, whom you heard playing just now, is a first-rate carpenter, and knows enough of type-setting to have trained several most promising young

printers, who are now getting a good living as compositors in Westhampton. The building over there is a refuge for women, presided over by our Sisters of Mercy, who also have charge of infant orphans. This is the school," he continued, laying his hand upon the fastening of a door. "Father Martin is just holding a geography class, I see."

For the next half-hour Tresham was lost in admiration and delight at all he saw. The arrangements, as far as they went, were most complete; the plan judicious; and the whole in good working order. These, then, were the men whom the Rector vilified and feared; who had been hooted, perhaps, by some of the very children of whom they were now the generous benefactors; who were spoken of with scorn and contumely by three-fourths at least of all the inhabitants of Heathercombe. These were the Samaritans with whom the Chosen People declined to have any dealings; the traitors, the unscrupulous, designing men who cut the ground from beneath the feet of the true labourers in the Vineyard. "I do not wonder," thought Tresham, "that people like our Rector should hate the Jesuits so bitterly. They are a standing reproach to every religious man and woman in the town."

Soon afterwards he took his leave, expressing in cordial terms his gratitude to the Superior for his courtesy. Father Aloysius replied, in quiet tones, that he felt indebted to

Mr. Tresham for the kindly interest he took in what he had seen, and expressed a wish that they might become better acquainted with each other. Giraldi accompanied his friend to the garden-gate in silence. Then, as they said good-bye, he suddenly grasped Tresham's hand between both his own, and, looking up in his face, said earnestly—

"How glad you must be that they don't have confession in your Church!"

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN AUGUST.

From this time forward, Tresham's visits to the house of the Independent minister became frequent and assiduous. Mr. Insight, with whom he had many ideas in common, was always glad to see him, while Naomi grew every day more charming in his eyes. There was one thing about her which Tresham could not help being struck with, namely, that she always appeared far more unrestrained and open in her manner towards him when her father was not present. With Mr. Insight in the room, she maintained an air of more or less reserve; it seemed almost as if the fact of his proximity had a depressing, or at least subduing, influence upon her; but whenever it chanced that she and Tresham were alone, she would chat and laugh without embarrassment, and every now and then allow the conversation to become slightly more confidential perhaps than was quite prudent. These were delightful days to Tresham. However weighted with misgivings or forebodings he might be on entering, one glance from the corner of the girl's sloe-

black eyes was sufficient to reassure him before a word was uttered; and when he took his leave, he always went away with his heart bursting with happiness and love, vowing that ere long he would make sure of Naomi's feelings towards himself, and ask her to become his wife.

But Tresham was not the only visitor at Mr. Insight's. Eric Charteris had prevailed upon the good-natured Captain Ricochet to come and break the ice with him, and a very gracious reception they had met with. Ricochet, it is true, was not to be won over; but Eric came away in an exuberance of boyish glee, protesting that Miss Insight was the most fetching young woman by a score of chalks that he had ever seen, and announcing, for the benefit of all whom it might concern, that he intended to cultivate her acquaintance in real earnest. Not that the lad had a single serious thought upon the subject—or any other subject, either; but he was not insensible to the attractions of a girl who had a pair of lustrous eyes, and never embarrassed him by referring to matters above his experience or understanding. Now that was what he couldn't stand in Beatrice Heath. Beatrice, reasoned this candid youth, was a splendid, tiptop girl; he liked Beatrice awfully, he assured you he did; but when she was always coming out with allusions to things he had never even heard of—expecting a fellow to know all about Guelphs and Ghibellines, whatever they might be,

and to have Mallock, Buckle, Lecky, and a lot of other old fools at his fingers' ends—why, it was a devilish nuisance; it made a fellow look so jolly small, you know. Whereas this little Naomi, this ripping little Naomi, with her ready babble and smart small-talk, this fetching girl with no prudery or nonsense about her, who was game for everything in the way of fun and pleasantry, why, by Jove, Sir, there was some real sport to be got out of her; and as for old Insight, he was a sterling old brick, Sir, in spite of his high-flown speeches; Lord alive, the old fellow meant well; he meant no harm, Sir, not a bit of it; in short, they were a very stunning pair, and he, Eric Charteris, Esq., had not the slightest objection to his opinion on the subject being made known to all the nobs in Heathercombe. Thus it happened that in course of time Eric Charteris and Naomi Insight were occasionally to be seen together in public; not strolling through fields and lanes as recognised lovers might be supposed to do, but walking home, perhaps, side by side from evening service on a Sunday; and this, coupled with the occasional attendance of the flighty youth at the Independent chapel, not unnaturally gave rise to a certain amount of brow-lifting and amused comment among the congregation. No disturbing rumours, however, of the flirtation reached the ears of Tresham; he had never chanced to meet Eric during any of his visits at

Mr. Insight's house, and when the youth took to gasconading in his presence on the subject of his supposed conquest, he properly and wisely took it all for just as much as it was worth.

Happy, therefore, in the promising aspect of the affair that lay nearest to his heart, the young clergyman devoted himself for the next fortnight to the training of his newly-organised choir, and to making preparations for the special services in aid of missions that were to be held in all the Heathercombe churches the first Sunday in August. As was hinted in a previous chapter, he accorded only a qualified assent to the opinions expressed upon the missionary question by Mr. Insight. He did not believe, in the first place, that the general run of missionaries sent out were of so low a mental calibre as the Independent minister seemed to think; nor, in the second place, was he at all sure that poor and comparatively uncultured men might not be better qualified to work among the peasantry and lower classes of Eastern peoples than College Fellows and Doctors of Divinity. It was not necessary, he reasoned, that the Bible-women and city missionaries who labour among the slums of our great towns should be deeply read in Greek or have taken a university degree; and surely the bulk of native populations with whom the English missionary came most in contact were not much higher, intellectually, than

the denizens of a London alley. So far, therefore, he did not intend to follow out the line of thought suggested to him by Mr. Insight; there was something else that seemed to him of infinitely more importance, a point which had been impressed upon him, too, during his visit to St. Gertrude's. He determined that, in the course of his sermon, he would take an opportunity of attacking the detestable religious intolerance which was so rampant in the town, let come what might of it. Why should he have the fear of Mr. Fairweather before his eyes? He would run a tilt against everything he had heard the Rector say to the disparagement of the Jesuits; he would boldly avow his opinion that so long as professing Christians indulged in the backbiting and vilifying of each other, they might spare themselves the trouble of preaching peace and goodwill to respectable idolaters; and he fervently though rashly hoped that his congregation would be swollen by as large an admixture of members of the other denominations in Heathercombe as was compatible with the dimensions of his church.

Now among those who had privately determined to go and hear the Rev. Arthur Tresham on this occasion was Lady Sharp. The new incumbent had been in Heathercombe now for nearly three months, and for some reason or other her ladyship had never yet taken an opportunity

to judge of his gifts for herself. All she knew of him was from hearsay. Much of this, it is true, was praise; but praise from some people may be a questionable commendation in the opinion of those who are of a different way of thinking, and it was rather disquieting to Lady Sharp to hear the man to whom she had given the living extolled by so unsound a thinker as Dr. Urquhart. She therefore decided upon attending one of the missionary services at the district church herself, fully prepared to give the young man a dose of wholesome admonition in case of any doctrinal eccentricities.

But Lady Sharp was far from being the only outsider who was destined to swell Mr. Tresham's congregation on that first Sunday in August. It was a glowing, splendid day, and the bells from all the churches rang out clamorously. Probably the most thinly attended service was that at Mr. Fairweather's; the most fully attended was certainly that at Mr. Tresham's. Long before eleven o'clock the principal seats were nearly all filled. The appearance of Lady Sharp, in whose face a certain conscious superiority to her benighted fellow-worshippers was pleasantly tempered by a severe ostentatiousness of devotion, occasioned a little flutter of attention from most of those already present. After this there came a pause; and then, suddenly, the expansive figure of the Duchess, glorious in a yellow crape

bonnet and regal purple dress, was seen filling nearly half the front pew in the gallery facing the pulpit. The Duke did not accompany her Grace; she was, however, well supported by the serviceable Miss Ashe, who, poor thing, between the weight of reticules, parasols, and self-complacency, was pretty heavily handicapped. The Duchess took her seat with an air of much propriety, as who should say that she knew very well she was in church, and meant to show people that she could behave with as much decorum as the best of them when she pleased; in pursuance of which she bent her body forward for a few seconds at a most uncomfortable angle, and assumed a lugubrious expression of face, with downcast eyes—performing the feat with admirable punctiliousness and self-control, and thereby producing a marked effect upon the congregation. Last of all, during that little hush of silence which always occurs between the completion of preliminaries and the commencement of the service, in walked the flouted but unsuspecting churchwarden, Mr. Pound.

Then, as the organ pealed forth "How lovely are the feet of them that bring us the Gospel of peace," the door of the vestry opened, and out streamed a white-robed procession of choristers, followed by Tresham in all the dignity of surplice and violet Durham hood. Lady Sharp stared, thunderstruck and indignant; then put down her

veil and leant back in her seat, prepared for anything. Mr. Pound glowered angrily at the display, and cast a withering glance at Lady Sharp, as though disposed to hold her responsible for this new vagary of her *protégé's;* while the old Duchess sat watching the scene with fat complacency, admiring the well-combed hair and fresh clean faces of the little choristers. When the service began, and the clear, pure, boys' voices blended softly with the tenors and basses in the exquisite harmonies of Ely Confession, she leant forward, gently swaying her head from side to side in rich enjoyment of the music; while Miss Ashe assumed an expression of intense devotional rapture, and attempted to join in the singing until frowned into silent confusion by the Duchess. The congregation generally were delighted, and showed their appreciation of the improvements by joining vigorously in the chanted Psalms, greatly to Tresham's satisfaction. In short, the inaugural service was a great success; and when the choir, in soft, well-balanced notes, intoned the Apostles' Creed to a low running accompaniment of fine chords, even Mr. Pound was forced to acknowledge that there was something in sweet church-music after all. But he was far from being won over; in point of fact, he was very angry at the whole business, and fully intended to make his anger felt.

At last Tresham mounted the pulpit, and Lady Sharp

immediately became all ears. There was a slight pause; then, after a quiet glance around him, the young preacher announced the text of his discourse. It was taken from the eighteenth chapter of the First Book of Kings, and consisted of the following words: "And when the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, The Lord, he is the God: the Lord, he is the God."

The sermon opened with a graphic and eloquent sketch of the wonderful scene upon Mount Carmel. The rival altars; the teeming multitude; the frantic priests, slashing themselves in desperation at the lethargy of their divinity as the evening shades drew on; the grave sarcasms of the prophet; the discomfiture of the idolaters; the grand apocalypse of Divine power at last, and the final cry of submission with which the pageant closed, were all depicted in forcible and vivid hues. So far, it seemed to Lady Sharp that she would have to suspend her judgment; there was nothing in the least heretical in all this, and she actually found herself listening with genuine interest. Nor was there anything to be condemned in the "application" put upon the story to the cause of mission-work at large. There were no morbid excuses advanced for apostasy, no exaltation of heathen ethics at the expense of true religion; on the contrary, it was all sound, orthodox teaching, and showed a hearty sympathy on the preacher's part

with every effort to eradicate idolatry and establish a purer faith.

"But now"—resumed the speaker, after a sort of little paragraph-pause; and the congregation, by a common impulse, all looked up in expectation. "But now we approach the darker side of the picture. Elijah, with all his great and good qualities, was a man subject to like passions with ourselves. He was but human; and the signal triumph he had achieved awoke in him, alas! all the deep and slumbering fanaticism of his soul. The rebound was terrible. Not content with the conversion of an entire people, with their deep humiliation and complete surrender, he must needs dim all the glory of the day by an act of wholesale butchery. Four hundred and fifty wretched priests were that night slaughtered in cold blood—not one of them escaped. And what was the result? Simply to undo all the good he had accomplished. Up till that moment he had been the hero of the hour; a nation lay at his feet, ready to make the fullest possible atonement for the apostasy of which they had been guilty. But now the tide of popular exasperation is at once turned against himself; nay, more—against the God in whose name the holocaust had taken place: for we read that the people soon began again to offer incense in high places to the gods they had abjured. Nor can we be surprised that, having slaughtered the four hundred and fifty

priests, Elijah should have reason to complain that his own life was in jeopardy, or that he should have been hounded out of the country by the Queen. But thus it ever is with religious persecutors; they become in turn the persecuted, and their violent dealings return upon their own pate. Do we know nothing of such monstrosities in our own times? How often, alas! has the world witnessed a repetition of the butchery at Kedron without even the shabby excuse of a victory on Carmel! Think of the tortures inflicted until comparatively recently on helpless, doting women upon the plea of witchcraft; think of the dreadful fate which Hypatia encountered at the hands of Cyril; think of the hideous death inflicted upon Servetus with the sanction of one whom a large body of our fellow-Christians recognise as their spiritual leader, and by whose very name they call themselves—on the plea of some doctrinal difference; think of the anathemas hurled by Christian Churches at Christian Churches and by Christian men at Christian men, because of some disagreement in the interpretation of a disputed text or misty metaphor; think of all these things, I say, with the shame and sorrow they deserve, and say, how much of the old intolerant fanaticism inspires us still! It is true that we no longer burn those of our brethren with whom we differ in opinion; it is true that the missionaries for whom I plead to-day are in no way likely to massacre

the priests of Buddha, as Elijah massacred those of Baal; but is the *spirit* of persecution dead? Are there none in this town—let me hope that there are none in this congregation—who still regard intellectual error as a crime, and look with hatred and distrust, mixed perhaps with a little ill-concealed professional jealousy, not at heathen priests, but at those who, though following not with us, are working in the name of Christ among us? If such there be, to them I say in all solemnity, 'Ye know not what spirit ye are of.' There are none who do a miracle in Christ's name who will lightly speak evil of Him. Beware, then, one and all of you; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God."

Lady Sharp turned hot all over. There was no longer any doubt as to the heterodoxy of her *protégé*. She, the pillar of the Little Hill, had been the means of introducing a new root of bitterness into the religious world of Heathercombe; she would not be able to escape the imputation of being the public patroness of an avowed heretic. Blind fool that she had been, to trust the perverted judgment of an unregenerate man like Sir Jupiter Rampant! Every eye in the church, she felt instinctively, was turned upon her. But she would avenge herself, and that before many hours were over her head. Her own reputation was at stake; nay, worse—her ascendancy at the Little Hill. Then she remembered with bitterness how Mr. Leech had

hinted at the possibility of Tresham's proving rationalistic in his views, and how he had foreseen the obloquy that would be reflected on the "cause" in consequence; she remembered, too, how loftily she had snubbed him for his pains, saying that she had no fears, and giving him to understand that his remarks were an unwarrantable reflection upon her own acumen. And now! — Perhaps she deserved this rod; but she could not bring herself to kiss it, for all that.

Then the service came to an end, the closing voluntary was played, and the congregation streamed out of church. People generally wondered, it is true, how Lady Sharp liked the sermon; but with a different motive from that with which she credited them herself. The sermon did not create a very widespread impression of heterodoxy; Mr. Tresham's views struck some persons as rather lax, perhaps, on the subject of Old Testament morality, but the salient point about it was that it seemed to have been aimed at Lady Sharp's well-known intolerance for other people's creeds. Tresham himself thought very little about the matter. He had had a capital collection, and the service had gone off admirably; the only possible malcontent, he fancied, would be Mr. Pound, and he felt rather elated, if anything, at the prospect of a battle with his churchwarden, in which his own victory was already gained. He spent

the afternoon in visiting a few of his sick poor, touching up parts of his sermon for the evening, and giving a short address at the Sunday-school attached to his church; then took a light dinner at five, and smoked a cheroot in a long chair till the bells began to peal again.

The evening service passed off quietly. The music went as well as in the morning, and the singing even better, being heartier and more congregational. When all was over, Tresham stepped out into the fresh, cool air, just as the stars were beginning to twinkle one by one in the deep blue sky above him, and walked slowly towards the house of the Independent minister. He longed to see Mr. Insight, and have a confidential chat with him over the events of the day; and he longed still more to see Naomi, which, considering that he had been with her for three hours only two nights before, was fully as unreasonable and foolish a desire as you might expect to find in a person afflicted with his complaint.

"Come in, Tresham," cried the old minister, heartily, as the young man rapped at the door of his little room. "We've not begun supper, so you're just in time. Somehow or other I was hoping you'd look in to-night."

"Thanks," said Tresham, giving his hand to Naomi. She was looking rather pale, he thought, after the heat of the day, and her eyes burned with a slumbrous fire that

wonderfully enhanced her beauty. An enchanting smile broke out upon her lips as their hands touched, and Tresham was in Paradise at once.

"Well, and how did your services go off to-day?" asked Mr. Insight, doing the honours of his cold mutton and pickles as though they had been ortolans and Strasburg pie.

"Admirably," replied Tresham, pouring out a glass of porter. "I could have wished for nothing better. The choir sang to perfection; and what pleased me even more was that the congregation joined in with a will. The collections amounted to something like ninety-seven pounds."

"Bravo!" said poor Mr. Insight, who had barely netted a five-pound note. "I'm sincerely glad to hear it. You must have preached a telling sermon, if that was the result."

"Somebody must have been pleased with it," returned Tresham, "for we found a note for fifty pounds in the bag this morning. It was in an envelope, and inside was written, '*With many thanks for your excellent discourse.*' I've no idea who the donor was; nor do I know what there could have been in my sermon that called forth such a very substantial expression of approval."

"Well, it was very satisfactory, at all events," said Mr. Insight. "Had you many outsiders?"

"Yes, several," said Tresham. "Her Grace was there, and Lady Sharp, among other notabilities."

"Then it lies between those two, depend upon it," replied the minister.

"Suppose it should have been Lady Sharp!" exclaimed Tresham, laying down his knife and fork. "I don't lay much store by what people think of me, but it certainly would be gratifying to feel that I had overcome her prejudices. She *may* have liked my sermon; and she's rich —she could certainly afford it."

"H'm," muttered Mr. Insight, dubiously. "I rather doubt it. I should say it was far likelier to have been the Duchess. Lady Sharp has not the reputation of being exactly reckless with her money, whereas her Grace does many kindly things in an eccentric way. What line did you take up in your sermon, if it's a fair question?"

Tresham related the tenor of his discourse, and gave a brief sketch of the manner in which he had applied it to the question of religious propaganda. Mr. Insight listened attentively, and screwed up his lips into a whimsical smile as the other ceased.

"Your fifty-pound note did not come from Lady Sharp," he said, very drily.

"What do you mean?" asked Tresham, somewhat surprised at his expression.

"Simply that she must have been horrified instead of conciliated," said Mr. Insight. "You've been preaching

rank heresy, my friend. Why, Elijah is the very patron saint of such people as Lady Sharp. Whatever can have put it into your head that she was likely to be pleased at such opinions? You'll hear from her ere long, I shouldn't wonder."

"The sooner the better, if she has anything unpleasant to say," returned Tresham, with a smile. "I'm not afraid of her. It must have been that good old Duchess, after all, then. I wish I had an opportunity of thanking her."

"I have rather a dread of that Duchess of yours," said Naomi.

"Of mine?" repeated Tresham, laughing; "why mine more than anybody else's? I don't see anything particularly dreadful about her."

"Ah! but there is, though," said Naomi. "Nobody knows women as well as other women, depend upon it. I know she can be very delightful to everybody, especially to men; but I shouldn't like to be in her power for a day. I'm sure there's something remorseless about her."

"A good hater, I dare say," said Mr. Insight, tapping his snuff-box, "but a hearty lover as well; a good woman, I am very sure. She's one of the most charitable persons in the world. I believe the amount of good she does is extraordinary. And the Duke is just as good. I only wish he did not hold himself quite so much aloof from

public religious movements. I don't venture to criticise his opinions, which I fear are somewhat advanced; but I do think it a pity that so good and sincere a man should not identify himself a little more openly with the cause of goodness, if only for the sake of example."

"I suppose you are pretty tired with your day's work," observed Tresham, after a pause.

"So tired," replied the minister, with a pleasant smile, "that I must have a cigar with you to recruit myself. There's nothing that soothes and refreshes me so much as tobacco. I'm like Mr. Spurgeon; I always smoke a cigar to the glory of God after supper on Sunday evening."

"Try one of mine for a change," said Tresham, producing his cigar-case. "By the way, Mr. Pound was in church this morning—looking sadly yellow, poor man. I'm glad he's about again, though I fancy there's a storm brewing in that direction, too."

Naomi had been very silent all the evening. She now moved her chair away from the table, and sat by the open window, gazing out upon the starlit sky. Tresham tried to catch her eye every now and then, and made an effort to draw her into conversation; but she seemed so preoccupied that he at last gave up the attempt. Just then a tap came at the door, and the servant entered with a note for Mr. Insight.

"If you please, Sir, the man wants to know if there's any answer," said the girl.

"I'll see about it to-morrow," replied the minister, after he had read the letter. "Stay, though—perhaps I had better settle it to-night. You'll excuse me for a few minutes," he said, turning to Tresham. "Don't go—I shall be back directly."

So saying he left the room, and was heard shutting his study-door behind him. Tresham looked across at Naomi, and then, seeing she did not stir, came over and sat beside her. At last he said—

"You are very silent this evening. Is anything the matter?"

"No," said Naomi, with a faint smile. "What should there be?"

"Nay, how can I tell?" rejoined Tresham, leaning towards her. "I only know that sometimes you are gaiety itself, and at others so dull that I can't help thinking there must be something troubling you. Aren't you any happier now than you used to be when first you came?"

"Sometimes I fancy myself so," said Naomi.

"Sometimes," repeated Tresham; "that's just it. Why not always? Do you find life so very wearisome?"

"Yes, I do," said Naomi, rather shortly, "and everybody very stupid—myself most of all. I don't suppose you can have any idea what life among a Dissenting congregation

is like; I know I hadn't until I came here and had to undergo it myself. How I do hate the whole pack of them—the Rabbitses, and the Tozers, and all the tribes of deacons and deacons' wives together! Just fancy that man Rabbits, whom we buy our butter and eggs of, coming and asking me whether I've experienced a change of heart, and why I don't apply to join the Church. And then Mrs. Rabbits sends us round shapes of blancmange, and bottles of horrible home-made wine, and I'm expected to thank her and look as if I were grateful for her condescension. It's bad enough to have to associate with such people, but it's simply unbearable to be subjected to their lectures and their charity at once."

"Very irritating indeed," said Tresham, smiling. "But you should remember that, after all, it is kindly meant, and that any want of tact on the part of these good people is simply the result of imperfect culture. Try and judge them by their motives, and give them credit for their motives being kind. And then, you know, there's a comic side to the affair, too. I've often thought that a quick sense of the humorous is a great blessing. It oils the wheels of life wonderfully."

"Perhaps," said Naomi, doubtfully. "But one wants something more than that, I fancy."

"True, indeed!" said Tresham, with suppressed excite-

ment. "Naomi, listen to me. You have unconsciously given me the opportunity I have waited for these many weeks. Whether it is the great want of every woman's nature that is now making itself felt to you for the first time, I cannot tell. But this I can tell, that I love you, and have loved you, passionately, ever since I first met you at The Hyacinths. O my darling, my darling!" cried the besotted parson, clutching the girl's hand and covering it with kisses, "give me the right to love you and protect you all your life! Haven't you seen that I love you? Won't you believe me when I tell you of it?—Naomi, speak to me. Tell me that I have not loved in vain; tell me, dearest"—his voice sinking, as his lips approached her cheek—"tell me that you will be my wife."

Naomi turned and gazed silently at her lover. A great struggle seemed to be going on within her breast. Her eyes fell, and her breath came short and quick; but not a word did she reply.

"Speak to me, dear one," whispered Tresham.

"Are you in earnest?" she uttered at last.

"Put me to the proof by saying yes," was the reply.

"Oh, think, think what you are doing!" cried Naomi, with an effort. "You may be mistaken. You may be sorry for it. You don't know—I may be different from what you fancy. Leave me—don't tempt me any more."

"I *will* tempt you, again and again, till I succeed," said Tresham, growing bolder. "I tell you, you have grown necessary to me—you are a part of my very life; I cannot live without you. Don't stand out against me, Naomi. Say that you'll be mine."

"Are you really willing to risk it?" replied Naomi. "I might not make you happy; it might be that——"

"No mights," cried Tresham. "Nay, I'll not let you off. Just one little word—say yes, and make me the happiest man in Christendom!"

"Then, yes; I will marry you, if you really wish it," said Naomi, very slowly. By a simultaneous impulse they both rose, and stood, hands joined in hands, looking into each other's eyes. Their lips could not help meeting after that, and a prolonged kiss cemented their betrothal.

Suddenly a quick step was heard in the passage; the door opened briskly, and Mr. Insight stood, staring in blank bewilderment at the scene before him. Tresham and Naomi had just concluded the impressive operation above described, and were still standing with the tips of their noses barely an inch apart, gazing intently at each other. Then they started, and coloured in no small confusion at the presence of a third party. As is usual in such cases, the man was by far the more embarrassed of the two. Naomi quietly dropped his hands, and, turning towards the

window, drew the curtain ever so little forward. Tresham, whose presence of mind seemed almost entirely to have deserted him, stood with flushed face and the ghost of an uneasy smile, awaiting the development of events.

"What in all the world are you two about?" ejaculated Mr. Insight, breaking the silence in a discouragingly matter-of-fact tone of voice.

Tresham tried to speak, but something seemed to rise in his throat and impede his utterance. Then he said, mastering his confusion with an effort—

"I—have just asked her—to be my wife."

"To do what?" asked Mr. Insight, sharply, as though he had not heard distinctly.

"To marry me," answered Tresham, in rather a loud key, and feeling the situation somewhat ridiculous. "You have no objection, Mr. Insight, let me hope?"

"You want her to marry you?" repeated the old minister, now looking very pale. "Merciful heaven, what makes you want that? Are you in sober earnest? How long has this been going on?"

"Ever since I first met her—almost," answered Tresham, simply.

"Sit down," said Mr. Insight, nervously. "And what has Naomi replied?"

"I advised him not to," said Naomi, in a cold undertone.

"You hear that?" said the minister, turning to Tresham, with some excitement in his manner. "She advised you not to—she herself. I advise you not to, too. You'd better not, believe me. Think better of it, Tresham—don't act precipitately. You've not been long acquainted—you don't know each other well enough."

"How can you use such arguments to me?" interrupted Tresham, with some impatience. "Do you think I should have asked her to have me if my mind had not been made up long ago? Do I want a wife I do not love? Besides, she has accepted me; she has promised. Surely you won't oppose our wishes?"

Mr. Insight was silent for a few minutes. Then he said, very slowly, "Not if I find that you are really bent upon it. But remember what I say. I do not advise the marriage. I do not wish it. I should be glad if it were broken off. But I will not interfere. You are free to marry Naomi if you and she have come to a final understanding upon the subject."

The cold, mournful tone in which these words were uttered went far towards damping Tresham's joy at Naomi's acceptance of his hand. That this dear, genial old man, whom he had grown to regard with an affection half-filial, should have accorded so ungracious, so unwilling, an assent to his proposals—should have withheld all congratulations, and even expressed a hope that the marriage might never

take place at all,—grieved, hurt, and puzzled him exceedingly. And then how unnatural seemed his conduct with regard to Naomi! Would not any other father have kissed the girl, and bidden God bless her? It was a sad betrothal. A chill, uncomfortable silence fell upon the little group, oppressing everybody, but which each one seemed unable to break. At last the deep boom of the distant church-clock announced the hour of half-past ten, and Tresham, with a tumult of conflicting emotions in his breast, got up to take his leave. The old minister followed him to the door.

"I have only one word to add," he said, in rather a husky voice. "I know I have disappointed you grievously to-night. But it was not from any want of love to you, my friend. Remember that. Good-bye."

One more experience still awaited Tresham before he slept that night. On his hall-table he found, on entering, a note; it was written on the deepest mourning paper, and was to the following effect:—

"DEAR MR. TRESHAM,—I was, as you may have observed, one of your hearers this morning. May I ask you to favour me with a call to-morrow afternoon about two? I am anxious to have a little conversation with you.—Believe me, yours sincerely, "SAPPHIRA SHARP.

"*Sunday.*"

CHAPTER XI.

NEMESIS.

The fate which causes men and women to fall in love with each other is often as inscrutable as it is resistless. Some of the most cultured minds are attracted by vulgar, uneducated, commonplace persons of the opposite sex, in a manner which causes bystanders to marvel greatly at the apparent infatuation, and to speculate curiously as to the future happiness of the ill-assorted pair. Yet it is a fact that many of these strange marriages are said to turn out happily enough. A cultivated student is often to be seen living in perfect connubial harmony with a woman who can scarcely write a note in decent English; some of the most devoted husbands upon record have been twenty or thirty years younger than their wives; while many girls of refinement deliberately choose Bœotians without a soul above their horses and their dogs. The Greeks did well to paint Cupid blind as well as mischievous. Nothing, one would think, short of utter blindness could account for the fact that a young and clever man should prove indifferent

to the true charm and brilliancy of such a girl as Beatrice Heath, and see a tawdry, commonplace young woman, such as Naomi, through the transfiguring lens of a passionate and absorbing love. But so it was; and so it often has been, and will continue to be, as long as human beings are under the baleful influence which has worked so much mischief in the world, and blighted so many lives of promise.

Just as the madman revels in his imaginary Paradise, sees a golden crown in his battered felt and a throng of obsequious courtiers in his keepers and fellow-lunatics, so did Tresham revel in his new-found empire. He awoke next day a monarch, crowned with the glittering diadem of love, and feeling that all creation had combined to place that royal emblem on his brow. Henceforth he was a sovereign—for did he not possess that which was worth the universe to him? a slave—for was he not held in the sweetest of all servitude by the very object whose possession crowned him king? Enchanting paradox! delightful contradiction! What was Lady Sharp to him now? He feared not her thunderbolts; they would fall like snowflakes on him, and melt by virtue of the newly-kindled fire now burning in his breast. Nor had he any intention of allowing her to order him about as she pleased. He had been conscious of being put through a preliminary examination

the first night he was at Brookfield Hall, but her ladyship had never before put forth so decided an intimation of authority as in sending him this summons to appear before her; and the young man determined to make a bold stand at the outset, to save, as he told himself, future misunderstandings. Luckily it happened that, a day or two previously, he had observed in passing to the schoolmaster that he should probably give a look-in at the schools early on that very afternoon; and although it was really a matter of no importance whether he did so or not, the fact afforded him an excellent pretext for disobeying her ladyship's behest. It was therefore to her no small astonishment and indignation that, about eleven o'clock, that unconscious woman received a note from her rebellious *protégé* couched in the following terms:—

"Dear Lady Sharp,—I regret that a previous engagement prevents me from calling upon you at the hour named in your letter of last night. I will do myself the pleasure, however, of looking in if possible about five o'clock this afternoon.—Believe me, yours most faithfully,

"Arthur Tresham.

"*Monday morning.*"

This made Lady Sharp very angry; for, apart from the cool impertinence of the refusal, the fact was that she expected a visit from Mr. Leech about five o'clock, and she

had been anxious to get her interview with Tresham well over before she met the pastor of the Little Hill. But there was no help for it now, and she felt she must just trust the outcome of events to Providence. A reference to the affair on the part of Mr. Leech was of course a foregone conclusion. He would expatiate mournfully upon the rapid increase of free-thought among the clergy of the Established Church, and reproach her with the want of care she had been guilty of, in giving so unsound a preacher to one of the most prominent pulpits in Heathercombe. He would be sure to express forebodings as to the discredit that would inevitably be reflected on the Little Hill, and there might even be some official notice taken of it by the deacons. All this drove Lady Sharp nearly wild, and she was in one of her least conciliatory moods when the door-bell rang that afternoon at about a quarter to five, and the servant announced the Rev. Mr. Leech.

"You were not with us yesterday morning," said the minister, with an affectionate but menacing smile, as he took his seat beside her.

"No," replied Lady Sharp, in as indifferent a tone as she could command. "I was at Mr. Tresham's."

"So I heard," resumed Mr. Leech. "I am told the young man preached a very strange discourse. What was its tenor, may I ask?"

"It was the thesis of a young man," replied Lady Sharp, with a certain lofty indulgence in her voice. "I cannot say I went with him in all he said. He seems to have rather uncertain views of scriptural exegesis. But of course one cannot expect that soundness in doctrine which one naturally finds in experienced believers, and a young man in his position can scarcely be judged by standards that we should apply to ourselves."

"But—but," exclaimed Mr. Leech, a flush of excitement rising to his brow,—"But from all I hear, it was much worse than that. What of the candles, and processions, and all the rest of the Popish mummery? I was always afraid he would prove rationalistic; you remember, my dear sister, that I expressed an apprehension to that effect when he first came; but here we have Romanism and Rationalism combined! I hear it was a most idolatrous display; and then, I'm told, he went up into the pulpit and compared the prophet Elijah to Torquemada, and said that he was rather worse than Jezebel!"

"Then you've been told a great deal of nonsense," snapped Lady Sharp. "He certainly spoke in a rather unenlightened way of Elijah, but I am inclined to put that down more to want of instruction than to any wilful perversion of the truth. At any rate, nothing can be gained by exaggerating his errors, and attributing to him things he never said."

"Well, well, let us hope the evil has been magnified," said Mr. Leech, shaking his head in a most irritatingly hopeless manner. "But I fear it will lead to much mischief, and prove a stone of stumbling in our path. Brother Blodgett came to talk the matter over with me yesterday evening; his wife, it seems, was present at the church, and one or two others of our friends. They were horrified at what they heard and saw; and there seems a general impression among the brethren that the Little Hill may be subjected to some reproach, for it is well known that the district church was in your gift. Indeed there has been a talk of the Church members making some protest; I don't know how exactly, but I fear——"

"I don't think the brethren need trouble themselves in any way," said her ladyship, growing crimson. It had come upon her in all its bitterness. She was being put upon her trial now, she felt; and, humble Christian as she was, it would be an outrage to her dignity to plead for herself before a jury of the chapel deacons. "I shall have a little talk with Mr. Tresham; I daresay we shall be able to come to an understanding. At any rate, no good will be done by the interference of Mr. Blodgett. You had much better leave it to me."

"My dear sister," pleaded Mr. Leech, laying his hand on that of his irritated patroness, "you pain me by taking

up this tone. Do you doubt my Christian confidence and love? There may be a trial awaiting you, a trial at which the flesh will rebel; for who among us is sufficient for these things? But lean on me, dear sister. Do not let our spiritual confidence in each other be diminished. Let us cling together through evil report and good report. And if you have been betrayed, through the amiability of the natural man, into an act of weakness which may be fraught with fruits of bitterness, why not school yourself to accept the chastisement with resignation? I am much exercised for you, believe me; and I shall wrestle mightily for you in prayer. Let us hope, too, unlikely as it seems, that the unhappy young man himself may be led to a knowledge of the truth, and repent before it be too late."

No chastisement could be more grievous to Lady Sharp than that now being administered to her by her chosen friend and pastor. She was a conscientious woman, in spite of her vagaries; but Mr. Leech's harangue goaded her to the utmost limits of endurance, and she felt at the moment as though she could have boxed his ears with energy. He was, after all, however, a faithful ally, and might yet prove of service to her; so she concluded that for the present at any rate her policy must be more or less conciliatory.

"I have no fears for the future," she said, coldly. "Mr.

Tresham is coming to me by appointment at five, and I shall have an opportunity then of saying to him all there is to be said upon the subject."

"Oh, let me stay and support you!" cried Mr. Leech, clasping his hands in supplication. "You may need support. And in the mouth of two or three witnesses, you know, every word shall be established."

"I do not think it necessary, or indeed advisable," said Lady Sharp, who was shrewd enough to form a pretty correct idea of the probable effects of the minister's exhortations upon Tresham. "You had better let me see him alone, and then we can talk the matter over together afterwards."

"As you wish, dear sister," returned Mr. Leech, with a disappointed smile. Just then a rather loud ring was heard at the door-bell. "There he is!" cried the minister, excitedly. "Let me step into the library till he is gone. I will read a book while you are talking to him."

"Just as you please," said Lady Sharp, indifferently. Footsteps were now heard approaching the room, and Mr. Leech got up hastily to make good his escape. Now there were, in all, three doors in the dining-room, where they had been sitting. One communicated with the passage along which Tresham was now advancing; another led into the library, where Mr. Leech intended to pass the next half-

hour in perusing *Barnes on the Apocalyptic Beasts;* while the third opened directly into a sort of store-closet, where Lady Sharp kept pickle-bottles, biscuits, and preserves. As the footsteps came to a pause outside, Lady Sharp turned round to receive her visitor, with an impatient gesture to Mr. Leech in the direction of the library; and the minister had just time to open the door of his retreat and plunge blindly in before the opposite door was opened to admit the Rev. Arthur Tresham. Unluckily, however, in his hot haste, he flounced into the wrong entrance; and the very same moment that Tresham was exchanging greetings with Lady Sharp, the unfortunate man found himself in an apartment about six feet square, surrounded on three sides with little white pots labelled 'Gooseberry,' 'Currant,' and 'Plum.'

"I am sorry I was not able to attend you earlier, Lady Sharp," said Tresham, as he shook hands with his hostess. "I had already made an engagement at the schools."

"It is of no consequence, as it happens," said her ladyship, with a forced smile. "I am glad to see you now, at all events. I want to have a little conversation with you, not having seen you to speak to for some weeks."

"I am sure you are most kind," replied Tresham, amiably. "I know I've been very remiss lately in coming to see you as well as many other friends; but I find I

have not much time for visiting. My days are pretty well taken up."

"I wanted to see you on a matter of some importance," returned Lady Sharp, bracing herself for the attack. "It is necessary for me to remind you of the relation in which I stand to the church at present under your charge, and of the fact that, in acting upon the recommendation of Sir Jupiter Rampant when I offered you the living, I did so on the understanding that your views were strictly evangelical. I must confess, therefore, that I was both pained and astonished at the doctrines I heard you preach in that church yesterday morning. I say nothing just now about the Ritualistic practices you seem to have introduced. It is the evident leaning you show towards the neology of the present day that I so much deplore; the laxity of principles, the latitudinarianism of thought, the light esteem in which you appear to hold eternal truth, that were so painfully manifest in your remarks. It is not only that you compromise me personally by this open avowal of rationalistic tendencies; but have you no sense of responsibility towards your congregation? Do you not know that their souls will be required at your hands? And does it not strike you that such a sermon as you preached yesterday may do more to unsettle people's minds and bring discredit on religion than fifty other sermons can repair?"

"You take me entirely by surprise, Lady Sharp," said Tresham, "and I must beg you to be rather more explicit. I am not conscious of having any rationalistic tendencies at all, far less of having given utterance to such in public. To what part of my sermon do you refer?"

"I should have thought it would be hardly necessary to particularise," answered Lady Sharp. "I do not believe that much good is ever done by controversy when once the mind has set itself in a direction contrary to the truth. My position is a more delicate and difficult one than you have any idea of, and I have no wish to commence a war of words which would probably lead to no satisfactory result."

"Then I cannot conceive what you have called me here for," replied Tresham. "You have brought charges against me which cannot but be shocking to any man of feeling, and I must beg you to place them definitely before me. Tell me what there was in my sermon yesterday that you take exception to. I have a right to demand this, and I do demand it."

"If you insist upon it, I will speak," said Lady Sharp, in a hard tone. "In the first place, I was lost in wonder at the manner in which you dared to criticise the acts of the prophet Elijah. The slaughter of the idolatrous priests was divinely appointed. The actions, and not only the words, of God's servants in those days were inspired. Who

are you, who are any of us, that we should set ourselves up in judgment against one of the saints of God? May we venture to condemn where God's Word approves? Are we to treat the Bible like a common history—I had almost said, like a book of plays—and form our opinion of Scripture characters as we might of men and women in the world? Then——"

"Excuse me," said Tresham, now on his mettle. "One thing at a time, if you please. Let me remark first that the Bible nowhere approves the slaughter of the priests by Elijah. It is entirely silent on the subject; therefore we are most certainly free to form our own opinions upon it. If, in our own day, the clergy had the power to massacre all idolaters or apostates, or even those who corrupted others, would even you say that they were justified in doing so? The whole question of religious persecution is here virtually involved. If Elijah was right in slaughtering the priests of Baal, then Queen Mary, who was equally sincere, was justified in burning Protestants. I see no difference between the two, from the standpoint of strict justice; and, being no advocate of religious persecution, be the persecutor who he may, I include all such measures in the same condemnation. That such things are opposed to the spirit of the Gospel you will scarcely deny yourself, I think."

"Elijah acted under the inspiration of God," said Lady Sharp.

"Where does it say so?" asked Tresham.

"It is implied throughout," was the severe reply; "will you deny that the extermination of the Canaanites was part of the same ordinance, and that the Israelites were divinely ordered to carry out the purification of the country by the sword?"

"They may have believed so——"

"Of course they did," interposed Lady Sharp.

——"when it was a question of exterminating other people," finished Tresham; "but you may be sure they saw no Divine ordinance in it when it came to the extermination of their own prophets."

"Well, and what do you conclude from that?" asked Lady Sharp, raising her eyebrows.

"That they were a very inconsistent set," was the reply.

"Let us drop the subject," said Lady Sharp, in low, bitter tones. "If such is the way in which you treat these matters, I do not wonder, of course, at the latitudinarianism of your views. I do not wonder, I say, that you can stand up in a pulpit, calling itself, at any rate, Christian, and condone the errors of infidelity on the one hand and of Romanism on the other. Why not throw off the mask, Mr. Tresham, and show yourself in your true colours? Why not be honest, and avow yourself what you are?"

"I have never done anything else, as far as I remember,"

rejoined Tresham, observing the excited woman curiously. "Nor have I any idea what you imagine me actually to be. All I did in my sermon was to plead for common Christian charity toward those with whom we differ in opinion, and I did so almost entirely in the words of Christ Himself."

"And thereby made a most unwarrantable use of them," retorted Lady Sharp. "I have heard of your visit to the Romish Oratory, and of the strange manner in which you were impressed. Of course I cannot tell how far you may have already gone in the direction of the Church of Rome; but before you take the final step, before you give your conscience over to a priest to keep for you, let me urge you——"

"Lady Sharp, you are talking Greek to me," interrupted Tresham, with intentional brusqueness. It seemed to him as if she were going off her head. "You first say I am drifting into infidelity, and now that I am going to become a Roman Catholic. This is mere talking at random."

"You cannot expect me to know in which direction you are wandering," resumed Lady Sharp; "that you know best yourself. But before you go too far to retrace your steps, let me warn you; let me appeal from Philip drunk to Philip sober——"

"Madam!" exclaimed Tresham, in a rage.

"The Duchess of Moneysworth, my lady," announced the servant, opening the door.

So absorbed had Lady Sharp and Tresham been in their conversation that they had neither of them heard the bell ring, and the sudden appearance of the Duchess, radiant with good-humour, struck them both dumb. Lady Sharp was sitting all of a heap in a low arm-chair, biting her lips and frowning, with a lowering expression on her flushed face and in her pale-green eyes; while Tresham was standing by the mantelpiece, hat in hand, with heightened colour, full of generous indignation, as the door burst open, and the old Duchess, in all the glory of her pink bonnet and favourite purple dress, swooped down upon them like an elderly impersonation of benevolence and fun.

"Well, and how do you do, Lady Sharp?" said her Grace, as she settled herself upon a chair as briskly as her bulk would permit. "And Mr. Tresham, too! This is fortunate indeed. Why, how warm you both look! I hope I haven't interrupted any very agreeable conversation?"

"Not at all, your Grace," replied Lady Sharp, with a livid smile. Tresham immediately recovered his equanimity, and resumed his seat. "This is a most unexpected pleasure. Is the Duke quite well?"

"Quite, I thank you," said the Duchess, with prim politeness. "Now, do you know, I'm quite delighted to meet

Mr. Tresham here, for I want to tell him how much I enjoyed his sermon yesterday, and the beautiful music and singing. Why, Mr. Tresham, dear, where did you manage to find all those nice, clean little boys? Lor, I thought to myself, what a pity Lady Sharp isn't here to listen to it all! Now I don't think it's proper, or delicate even, to praise people to their faces, but I can't help telling you, Lady Sharp, how beautifully everything went off, and what a good, Christian sort of sermon that boy preached. I haven't enjoyed a service like that I don't know when; and as for Margaret Ashe, why I thought she was going to cry, the great goose. I tell you what, Mr. Tresham; I shall try and bring the Duke with me next time I come—there!"

"I am surprised you didn't see me yesterday, Duchess," said Lady Sharp; "I happened to be present at the service you refer to."

"Were you, indeed?" exclaimed the Duchess, her violet eyes twinkling in what seemed to Tresham rather a suspicious manner. "Why, now, that's curious. Where can you have been sitting, I wonder? Well, I'm very glad to hear that. You must have been very much gratified, I should think."

The contortions of face produced by this application of tweezers to the unfortunate woman were so painful to behold, that Tresham sympathetically interposed.

"I am glad that everybody seems so well satisfied," he

said, smiling; "but I should be better pleased still if I could find out something that has been puzzling me sorely ever since."

"And what may that be, pray?" inquired the Duchess, with a most transparent effort to appear unconscious.

"Somebody put a fifty-pound note into the bag," replied Tresham, pointedly, "accompanied by a little word of kindness and encouragement that affected me more than I should like to own. I am very anxious to discover who that kind friend was, if only that I might have an opportunity of expressing my heartfelt thanks."

"Dear me, what a curious thing!" exclaimed the Duchess, innocently. "But I dare say the person who gave it isn't very far off. Pray, Lady Sharp, have *you* any idea who it was?" continued her Grace, mercilessly, as she bent her roguish old eyes full on the face of that writhing victim.

"Not in the least," was the short rejoinder.

"Well, now, that is stranger still," said the Duchess. "If *you* can't guess, and you at the service, too, who is likely to know? Never mind, Mr. Tresham; you may depend upon it that it was somebody who means well to you, and it's always pleasant to have friends, even though you don't know who they are."

"You will take a cup of tea, Duchess?" said Lady Sharp, with her hand upon the bell.

"Thank you, I will," replied her Grace, promptly. Whereupon Lady Sharp rang the bell and gave the necessary order. Tresham made a move as though to take leave, not feeling disposed to risk the offer of any refreshment; but the Duchess interfered at once. "Don't go, Mr. Tresham," said the old lady. "I shall be off in a few minutes, and if you have no more to say to Lady Sharp, I want you to come a little way with me." So down he sat again.

"Let me offer you a biscuit with your tea," said Lady Sharp. "Rebecca, bring some biscuits."

The servant crossed the room to procure the required cakes, while the ladies sipped their refreshment in silence. Tresham sat, feeling half-amused and half-pained at the course taken by events, and wondering how it was that this marvellous old Duchess should have such a strange knack of turning up at unexpected moments, like a sort of fairy godmother, and putting to flight the armies of the aliens. Suddenly a piercing shriek, succeeded by a crash of crockery, was heard from the interior of the closet. All three jumped up in a fright.

"What's the matter, Rebecca?" exclaimed Lady Sharp, impatiently. "What have you broken now?"

"Oh, my lady! The man! the man!" cried Mrs. Rebecca, between convulsive sobs, as she rushed back into the room.

"A man in the cupboard?" exclaimed the Duchess, rising to the emergency with spirit. "Just let me get at him! Well, my good man, and who are you? and what do you want here?"

"Mr. Leech!!!" ejaculated Lady Sharp, faintly, as that reverend person emerged, with a deprecating smile, from among the jams and pickles. At first he seemed quite unable to speak, and confined himself to expressing his apologies in dumb show; but soon he managed to gasp out, "It was a mistake—a mistake; I thought it was the library."

"Thought *what* was the library?" demanded the Duchess, austerely, not recognising Mr. Leech. "What have you been doing in the cupboard, Sir? and pray who let you in?"

"It is Mr. Leech, the minister," interposed Lady Sharp. "I thought he had gone long ago; I had no idea he was in the cupboard."

"You forget, my dear sister," said the unfortunate man, with an appealing smile. "I intended to go into the library, you know, and I went in at the wrong door by mistake. I never dreamt——"

"But why didn't you come out, Sir, when you found yourself in the pickle-closet?" continued the Duchess. "Do you mean to say you've been in there all the time we've been talking?"

"Mr. Leech left me just as Mr. Tresham was announced," said Lady Sharp, who was evidently suffering intense annoyance at the *exposé;* "and it seems he opened the wrong door. There's no harm done. Let me give you a cup of tea, Mr. Leech; and, Rebecca, bring those biscuits."

"You must have had a very uncomfortable time of it, Sir," pursued the Duchess, with ostentatious anxiety.

"I've endured a martyrdom, I assure you, ma'am," replied Mr. Leech. Which, considering all he had overheard, was not improbable. The difference in tone between Lady Sharp's criticisms on Tresham's sermon in speaking to him and in speaking to Tresham himself struck him with amazement. It was clear that she felt herself in a very uncomfortable position, but was unwilling to own it to him; and then, to crown everything, in comes this dreadful Duchess, and mars the effect of all her ladyship's exhortations.

"Well, you'll have had enough jam to last you all your life, I should think," remarked her Grace.

"Oh, I have a sweet tooth," said Mr. Leech, with a ghastly attempt at sprightliness. Tresham coughed in his handkerchief to hide a smile.

"So I hear the Duke of Grandchester is going to give a house-warming before long," said the Duchess, by way of changing the subject.

"Indeed!" said Lady Sharp, indifferently.

"A house-warming in August?" tittered Mr. Leech, facetiously. "I should have thought a house-cooling process would be more to the purpose just now."

"Oh, there are plenty of people who are quite cool enough by nature," retorted the Duchess, who did not relish the minister's forthputting. "Yes, I hear it's to be a grand affair, and half Heathercombe's to be invited. Well, it'll give the girls something to talk about for the next month, I suppose."

"I cannot say I take much interest in such vanities," remarked Lady Sharp, who seemed to get crosser every minute.

"Vanities!" echoed the Duchess.

"Our dear sister means that her affections are set on things above, not on things on the earth," said Mr. Leech, with his mouth full of muffin. "It would be well if we were all more like her in that respect, I'm sure."

"Pray, Lady Sharp, are you this gentleman's sister?" demanded the Duchess. "I was not aware of it before."

"Are we not all brothers and sisters in the Church, ma'am? That is, all believers?" replied Mr. Leech.

"I don't know what you may be in church, Sir," retorted the Duchess; "but I know I shouldn't like to call every man I met there my brother. However, it's a question of taste, I suppose."

"There may be degrees of relationship," ventured Tresham, with a half-smile. Lady Sharp looked as black as a thunder-cloud. Mr. Leech heaved a gentle sigh, and gazed mournfully at Tresham through his blue spectacles, as though lamenting his young brother's mistimed flippancy.

"Quite a happy family," remarked the Duchess, helping herself to a bit of muffin. "Mr. Tresham, dear, I'll trouble you to hand me a little salt."

"Have salt in yourselves," murmured Mr. Leech, as Tresham passed the muffineer. "Ah! what should we do without salt? The dear apostle Paul was full of it!"

"Lor!" exclaimed the Duchess.

"But what if the salt loses its savour?" interposed Lady Sharp, with a frowning glance at Tresham. "What is it fit for then?"

"Well, I generally manage to get very good salt," said the Duchess, who had no idea what they were both driving at. "But, Lady Sharp, where's my little friend Miss Edith? I should be sorry not to see her before I go away."

"My daughter has gone down the town," answered her ladyship. "I sent her with a few commissions to the draper's. She ought to be back before long."

"Oh, so you buy your things in Heathercombe," remarked the Duchess. "So do I, as much as possible. I

think it's only right to encourage the trade of the place one lives in."

"Yes, I generally deal at Debenham's," continued her ladyship. "His prices are reasonable, and I find I can often make very good bargains with him."

"Bargains!" repeated the Duchess; "you don't mean to say, madam, that you *bargain* with the tradespeople, do you?"

"Certainly I do," said Lady Sharp, "especially when they're selling off job lots. Indeed, I consider myself rather a clever market-woman. Edith is a poor hand at it, and I never think of trusting her except in trifling purchases."

"Well," exclaimed the Duchess, "I never knew it was possible to bargain with respectable tradespeople; but then, to be sure, I never tried. However, I must be off. Good-bye, Lady Sharp; give my best love to little Madam Edith when she comes back. Good afternoon, Sir," with a stately bend to Mr. Leech; "I'm glad to see you so much recovered after your mishap. Come, Mr. Tresham; I think you said you were going a little way with me."

Tresham took a very formal leave of his patroness, bestowed a friendly nod on Mr. Leech, and accompanied her Grace to the door. No sooner were they outside than the old Duchess burst into a peal of triumphant laughter, and,

taking hold of her companion's arm to help her down the steps, exclaimed, in a sort of suppressed shout—

"Lor, Mr. Tresham, dear, I never thought I could have held out as long as I did! Oh, how I have been longing for a good laugh! I knew what she'd be up to, the old hussy, so I determined to go round and tell her plainly what *I* thought of the affair. Lor, dear, oh dear, the look of her face was enough to make me die. Wasn't she in the act of scolding you when I came in?"

"Scolding is a mild term for it," smiled Tresham.

"Well, that is a splendid joke," continued the wicked old lady, in huge delight. "And then that wretch of a man shut up in the pickle-closet all the time! Oh, I wish I'd known of it; I'd have contrived somehow or other to lock him in, and then have lost the key. Lor, and did you hear what she said about making bargains with her tradesmen? Nasty, vulgar woman; I never heard of such jobbish doings. Well, I shan't get over this for a long time. It'll be nuts to the Duke; he can't bear her any more than I can, though he *is* so polite to everybody."

"And now," said Tresham, "add to your Grace's many kindnesses by telling me all you know about that fifty pounds."

"Why, what makes you think that I know anything about it?" said the Duchess, with a chuckle.

"Something tells me that you do," replied Tresham.

"Well, well, you'd better ask the Duke next time you see him," returned the old lady. "I dare say he knows something. There, now I'll get into the carriage. Good-bye, Mr. Tresham," shaking hands with him and nodding her head effusively: "come and see me soon." And without waiting for any thanks, the merry old lady drove rapidly away, leaving Tresham standing by the wayside, full of conflicting emotions. Glad as he had been of the interruption afforded by the Duchess's sudden entrance, he felt deeply pained at the cruel words of Lady Sharp, wild and foolish as they were. He was conscious that her accusations were totally unfounded; still, he grieved to think that anybody should have so misunderstood him, and that there was so little sympathy between himself and the person to whom he owed his present position in the Church. At last a very strange suspicion began to shape itself in his mind. Was it possible that Lady Sharp could be ever so slightly deranged? He had heard of such things; and now, when he came to think of her wild, exaggerated words, her contradictions, the sullen, haggard look in her eyes, her growing unamiability, and her gloomy religious views, it seemed to him that there might be some incipient mental disease at work, which, if not checked, would eventually develop itself into something akin to monomania. She had discon-

tinued her Thursday-evening receptions, and had given people to understand that they would not be resumed. Her manners were growing sourer and more dictatorial every day, even towards her own children; and it was known that she had much difficulty in getting any respectable servants to stay with her. After all, she was evidently an unhappy woman, and Tresham, as he walked at a leisurely pace towards the house of his *inamorata*, arrived at the conclusion that great allowances ought to be made for her on the score that she was, perhaps, not wholly responsible for her actions.

Mr. Insight was sitting alone in his study when Tresham's now well-known rap was heard at the door. He rose immediately, and gave his future son-in-law a hearty welcome, which contrasted pleasantly with the cold, abstracted air he had worn the night before. Tresham felt relieved by the change, and threw himself into an arm-chair which stood near, with his usual happy smile.

"Well, and what have you been doing with yourself to-day?" inquired Mr. Insight, lighting a cigar.

Tresham replied by giving the old minister a succinct account of all that had just occurred, describing the discovery of Mr. Leech in the jam-closet and his reception by the Duchess in a vein of humour that made his listener laugh heartily.

"I told you that you'd soon hear from her ladyship," he remarked, at the close of the recital. "And it may really be a rather serious thing for her. We ministers generally hear a little of what goes on in each other's chapels, and I may tell you that the congregation at the Little Hill are a very difficult set to deal with. When it first transpired that the district church was in Lady Sharp's gift, there was much self-congratulation among them; it was a grand thing, they thought, for a Church of England pulpit to be at the disposal of an Original Perfectionist, especially when the Perfectionist was so prominent a member of their own flock. They seem to have indulged a hope that any incumbent so nominated would be more or less susceptible to the influence of themselves as a congregation through Lady Sharp, who, of course, would have almost as much power in one direction as in the other. But now they will probably say that she has abused her privileges, and been guilty of selecting a clergyman she knew nothing about, whom she can't manage, whose orthodoxy is questionable, who ignores both their pastor and themselves, and who is likely to bring discredit upon their own name; and I shouldn't at all wonder if they were to make it rather unpleasant for the poor woman. Not that she won't hold her own, mind you; she's quite capable of doing that; and as no pope likes to be deposed, I think it very likely we shall

hear of some very sharp dissensions in that quarter before long."

"But how intolerable!" exclaimed Tresham. "The idea of a clergyman being placed in such a false position! However, I'm not supposed to know all this, of course. I remember, now, she did say something about being in a difficult position herself; but I had no idea what she meant. Perhaps, too, Leech's concealment in the jam-closet had something to do with it; he may have been talking the affair over with her before I came in, and then bolted in there to overhear what passed. How unutterably disgusting it all is, to be sure!"

"Leech has more influence in that quarter than is at all desirable, to my thinking," said Mr. Insight, meaningly.

"Do you think he has?" returned Tresham. "It didn't strike me so this afternoon, judging by her manner to him. She seemed thoroughly angry and annoyed. I should have fancied she had the upper hand, of the two. I have always looked upon Leech as a sort of hanger-on, who is only too thankful to have such a rich woman for a patroness."

"Far be it from me to judge him or any man," replied the minister; "but granting all you say—and I fear me there is much truth in it—the fact that such a state exists proves that his influence over her is not small. From what I hear of this poor lady, she has a very gloomy sort of

faith, and is much given to a morbid, unhealthy analysis of her spiritual condition, which renders the companionship of a sympathethic mind a comfort to her; and there's no doubt that Leech takes more advantage of it than he ought. I trust I am not uncharitable in my suspicions."

"I never liked the man," said Tresham, bluntly. "His soapy, unctuous manners irritate me exceedingly. But where's Naomi?"

"She is out at present," said the minister, "but will soon be in. Of course you'll stay with us this evening."

"I came on purpose," said Tresham, with a bright smile. "But does Naomi often go out alone?"

"Why, yes," returned the minister. "She can't stay in the house all day, and I'm generally too much occupied to accompany her. You've no objection, surely?"

"Certainly not," replied Tresham. "I forgot for the moment that we were not in London. And then it will only be for a short time, I hope."

"Ah!" said Mr. Insight, raising his eyebrows. "Does that mean you want the marriage to be soon?"

"Well, I suppose so," said Tresham, smiling. "As soon as you can make up your mind to part with her, at any rate. There's no necessity for a long engagement, that I see."

A shade passed over Mr. Insight's face, and he fell into

a brown study. Tresham looked at him for some seconds uneasily, then he said—

"Mr. Insight, I do beseech you to be frank with me. Why do you look so coldly on our union? That you have some definite reason I am convinced; and if there is anything in it to affect the happiness of either of us, you should certainly let me know. Act as candidly towards me as I have acted towards you. It will be far better in the end."

"My only reason for this reluctance," replied the minister, slowly, "is that I am sure—I mean, I am afraid—you will not make each other happy. I confess myself to have been utterly astonished when I heard that you had set your affections upon Naomi, and still more so when I heard that she had accepted you. Tresham, I don't believe she will make you the wife you expect. I am not given to presentiments or forebodings; but I have a deep impression that no good will come to either of you; and while I lay no veto on the marriage, I do make a strong point of delaying it for some time. So much, at least, I have a right to ask."

"In order that something may happen in the meantime to prevent it?" said Tresham, rather bitterly.

"I do not deserve the sneer," was the old man's reproachful answer. "I try to act for the best, God knows. I dare

say you think I'm selfish; that I am unwilling to be robbed, in the evening of my life, of the companionship of my only child. But it is not so. I am only sorry that you should so unreservedly have given your heart to one who can never be, if I read her character aright, the best guardian of it. That, however, is done, and it is ill reasoning with a man in love. My only reason for wishing the marriage to be delayed is that you may both have a full opportunity of becoming better acquainted with each other than you are now before the irrevocable step is taken."

A sudden rattle at the front door, a quick footstep in the passage, and enter Naomi. What could be the mystery about this girl, if mystery there were? Something, surely, was necessary to explain the strange reluctance of Mr. Insight to the marriage—a reluctance felt for Tresham's sake, and not for hers, as the old minister had broadly hinted the previous night. Had she some fearful failing, that would not bear being talked about? some dread hereditary taint, which might burst out at any moment? And if so, what? Or had she, like Elsie Venner, a drop of serpent's venom in her veins? There she stood, fresh and fragrant from her walk in the sweet evening air, her lilac muslin frock hanging in graceful folds over her girlish limbs, and a nodding feather in her saucy little hat. Tresham thought his heart would burst with mingled love, admiration, and per-

plexity, as he looked upon her. She gave a little start when she saw him, and a coy, sidelong look from the corners of her sloe-black eyes; then came forward with the faintest shell-pink blush upon her face, and offered herself to his impetuous salute.

They had a very merry tea, in spite of everything. Naomi was gaiety itself, and laughed and chattered away delightfully. Never had she appeared so beautiful in Tresham's sight: even Mr. Insight seemed to cheer up a bit, and threw himself into the conversation with the air of one who is determined to make the very best of the inevitable. He watched his daughter narrowly, however; he noted the rising flush upon her olive cheek and the unwonted brilliancy of her eyes with the carefulness of a physician who seeks to guard a feverish patient against excitement. There was certainly something feverish about her sprightliness; even Tresham fancied that. But then she was so affectionate, so fascinating, so altogether sweet; she prattled so merrily about nothing in particular, and pronounced such prettily absurd opinions about everything in general, that the impression soon passed off his mind. And then afterwards, when the minister found he had something very important to attend to in his study, and left them alone together—but that is no business of ours. They were no doubt as happy and as imbecile as people are generally said to be

under such circumstances; so much may be taken for granted. It was not until Tresham had left the house, and found himself walking home along the quiet streets, that the idea occurred to him—

"I wonder what sort of a woman Naomi's mother was?"

END OF VOL. I.

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